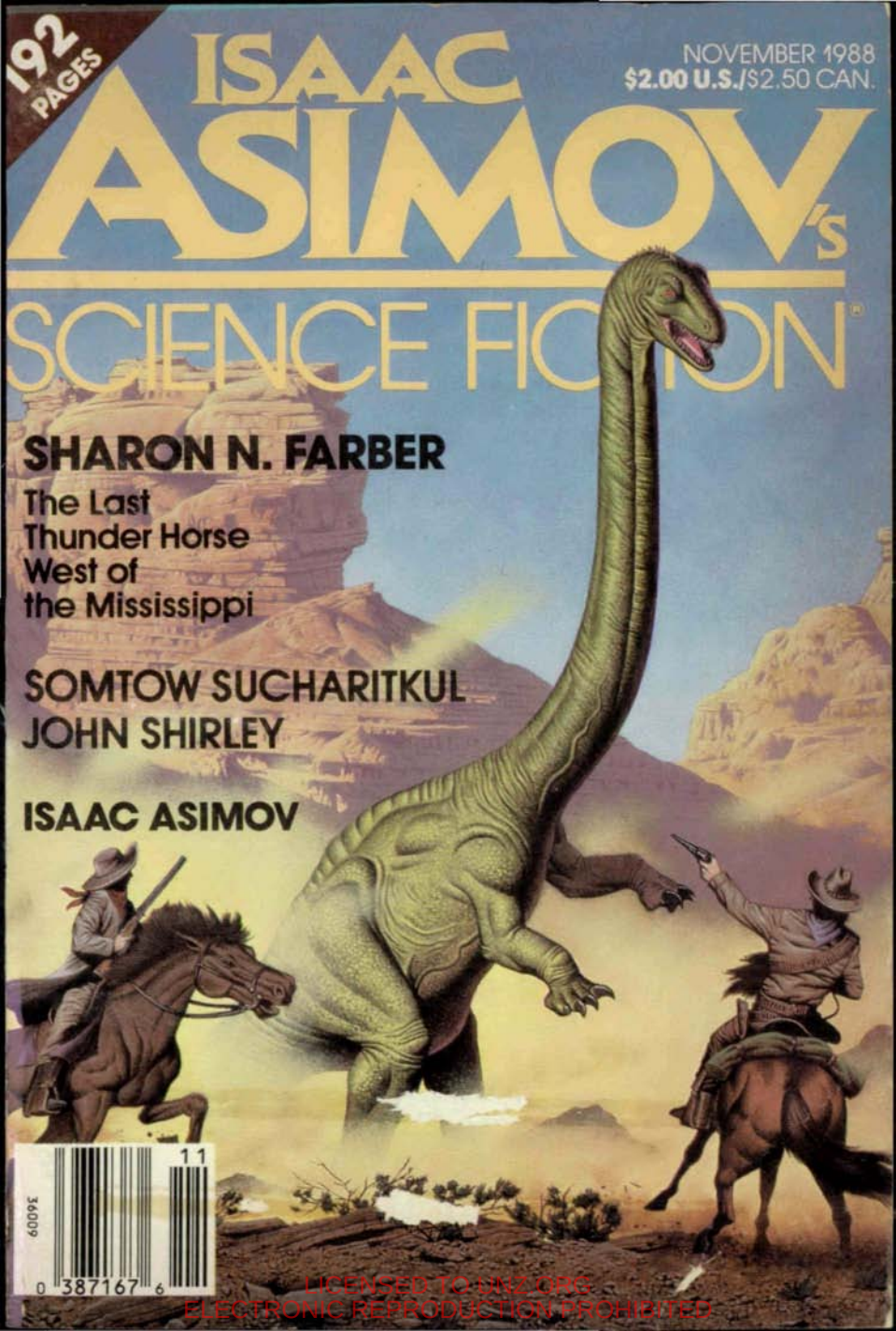

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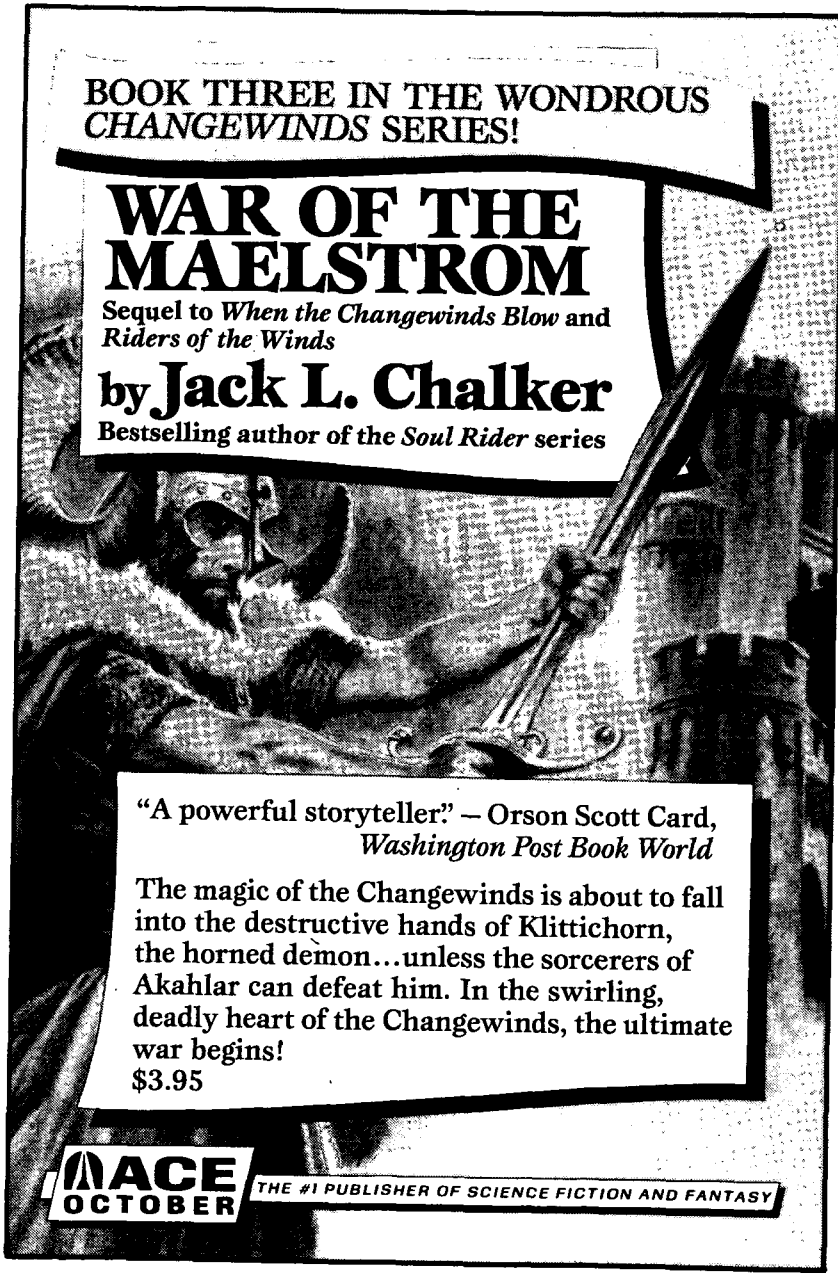

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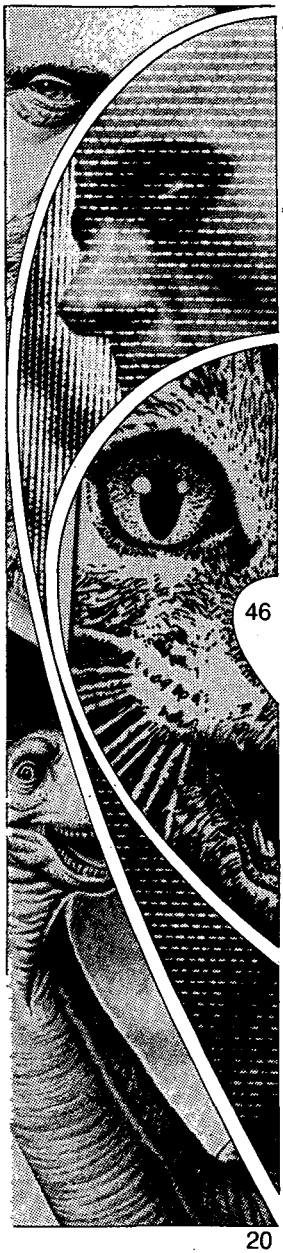

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ISAAC ASIMOV'S SCIENCE FICTION®

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EDITORIAL
FRIVOLITY

by Isaac Asimov

My high school was "Boys High School of Brooklyn." It was, in those days (the early 1930s), a classy school noted for its mathematics team and for its reputed ability to get its students into the better colleges. I went there because I fancied myself a budding mathematician. I joined the mathematics club and found out in about five minutes that I wasn't a mathematician. (No one was more astonished than I.)

You would think that would teach me a lesson, but it didn't.

We had an English teacher in the school named Max Newfield who served as faculty adviser for the literary semi-annual, the *Boys High Recorder*. It was a magazine edited by students and containing stories, essays, and poetry by students. Newfield must have felt it to be a thankless job trying to get anything even semi-literate out of teenagers, and probably it was, so he had a brilliant idea. Why not give a special class in creative writing and persuade the students who volunteered for the class (and who therefore must have literary ambitions) to write for the *Boys High Recorder*.

I was among the first in line to apply for the special course. It was given to third-year students so everyone was sixteen years old—except me. I was not quite fourteen. That didn't bother me. I had long since identified myself as a child prodigy and was very content with the role. However, it did mean that I was more immature and inexperienced than the others—I was even more immature and inexperienced than the average kid going on fourteen.

But that's all right. I considered myself a writer as, earlier, I had considered myself a mathematician. I cheerfully wrote my assignments and I cheerfully volunteered to read them in class, quite certain that everyone would marvel at my expertise.

They did not. In fact, Mr. Newfield characterized my writing with a barnyard expletive I had never before heard a teacher use. And the rest of the class laughed heartily.

Nevertheless, when the final assignment was handed out, that of writing a story, essay, or poem for the *Boys High Recorder,* I threw myself into the task with enthusiasm. What's more, the essay I

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wrote was *accepted*—the first editorial acceptance of my life (though, of course, there was no money involved).

I came up to see Mr. Newfield in order to congratulate him on the clarity of his vision, and his obvious ability to recognize good stuff when he saw it. He stared at me somberly and said, "Yours was the only piece submitted that even attempted to be funny, Asimov. I *had* to take it."

In fact, when the May 1934 issue of the magazine appeared, it contained a small note on the final page which deplored the fact that so many contributions signified "too much pursuance of Poe, Dostoevski, and O'Neill." It went on to say, "Due to the fact that we have received so many articles of the more somber point of view, it has been necessary to discard a number of them, even though they are of literary value, in favor of lighter material."

My essay was the only item in the book that could be classified as "lighter material" so I understood why Newfield had to take it.

Looking back on the incident, I can see that I must have learned three things from it.

First, there is a terrible tendency on the part of young writers to suppose that literary value is synonymous with the dregs of life. There may be the same terrible tendency on the part of young critics.

Second, as a result of this, the human hunger for something lighthearted becomes overwhelm-

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ing and those who take advantage of this (or who do so, as in my case, without giving it any thought at all) can profit.

Third, and more personally, I learned that a real writer cannot be discouraged. I was discouraged out of the mathematics club at once because I was simply not a mathematician. However, not all the humiliations that Newfield and the rest of the class heaped upon me in that infamous semester bothered me in the least. It never budged me in my view that I was a writer, because I *was* a writer, and that's all there was to it.

It makes me smile wryly, now, as I look on the contents page of my copy of the Spring 1934 *Boys High Recorder* to know that it could be auctioned off for quite a sum for no other reason than that my name is included in the table of contents. I wonder what Mr. Newfield would have said if he had known that that was what would come to pass.

And yet—there is an odd symmetry, sometimes, to the course of human events. Now it is I who play the role that Newfield played over half a century ago. The Chestertonian Gardner Dozois is the editor of this magazine, of course, but I fulfill the role of "faculty adviser" after a fashion, though I am careful not to advise unless asked to.

And yes, there is still an overwhelming tendency of writers to write deadly serious stories, and the ones we print are very, very good.

Nevertheless, this tendency to Dostoievski it does result in a hunger for an occasional light-hearted piece. Remember that Shakespeare inserted bits of humor into even his starkest tragedies, and that his two most successful villains, Richard III and Iago, were notable for their senses of humor. (Without that leavening touch, their villainy would be as dramatically tasteless as is that of Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing.)*

We are therefore particularly delighted to do a bit of comedy now and then, and we've done some good stuff in that direction, too.

But, of course, light-hearted stuff may be viewed as "frivolity" and disapproved of for that reason. Thus, there were plenty of people who thought that Shakespeare was crude stuff because of his clowns and bumpkins and of the manner in which he allowed his Falstaffs to intrude on the lofty speeches of his Henry IVs (as though any sane man wouldn't prefer Falstaff to Henry IV).

There's nothing that can be done about this. I know. I had a chance to observe my father in detail, for instance. While a good man in many, many ways, he lacked any trace of a sense of humor. He looked down upon "frivolity" and wanted everything serious and solemn. I was a constant source of disappointment to him in this respect, but I absolutely refused to abandon my view that if God had created humanity, he did it only to exercise his sense of the ridiculous.

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And so it comes about that I deliberately contribute to the sense of fun by occasionally writing a "George and Azazel" story. (Doubleday will, incidentally, publish a collection of those stories this year under the title of *Azazel*.)

However, not all the readers enjoy them. I can't help that, because no one can please everyone. (You should hear what George Bernard Shaw had to say about William Shakespeare—but then Shaw must have gotten tired of being considered the second greatest English dramatist.)

Some readers object because the stories are predictable. Azazel always gives someone something that he or she ought to want, and it turns out to have something wrong with it. And then, George, having insulted the narrator of the story all through, manages to cadge some money from him. (Why not? Does it occur to the readers that the narrator writes up George's story and gets a hundred bucks for every buck he gives George?)

Of course, the stories are predictable. It isn't the plot I'm writing the story for. I write it for the humor, in the first place. It gives me a chance to overwrite outrageously. It gives me a chance to put in puns, misquotations, paradoxes, and every kind of word-game I can think of. All that gives me a great deal of pleasure and may give some of the readership pleasure, too.

Secondly, it gives me a chance to vent a little irony. In one of my George and Azazel stories, I made fun of economists, in another of posh social clubs, in still another of the movie version of college life, and in yet another, of abstract art. However much the irony may be couched in humor, it has a serious purpose. —Yes, even "frivolity" can have a serious purpose.

In fact, only one response to these stories of mine really pains me; and that is the sometimes expressed opinion that the only reason the stories are printed is because I am Isaac Asimov and the magazine is somehow forced to publish them. If the stories were written under an unknown name, the implication is, they would surely be rejected.

It seems to me I have said this a million times, but I'll try it once more. I *do* get rejected now and then, even by a magazine with my name in the title. I recently wrote a Black Widower story which Eleanor Sullivan of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, a dear friend of mine of twenty years standing, rejected because there was too much science in it. So I passed it on to Gardner, who rejected it because there was too little science in it.

So there you are. My stories are not accepted on my name alone. Please believe me. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Isaac:

In *IAsfm*, February, 1988, p. 182, Baird Searles wonders about the provenance of the name of Ms. Engh's hero Arslan. The word is Turkish for "lion" (*a*'s as in "father" but short; stress on the second syllable). Lewis's "Aslan" is an alternative form. Turks have long used it as a name. In 1071 the Turks under Alp Arslan destroyed the Byzantine army at Manzikert, starting the East Roman Empire on the road to extinction; in 1097 the First Crusaders under Bohemond of Taranto in turn beat Kilij Arslan at Doryleum.

Kaor,

L. Sprague de Camp
Villanova, PA

Sprague (my old friend of fifty years standing) is in his eighty-first year and is, obviously, going strong. Long may he wave!

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

A recent letter to your magazine irritated me no end. It has burned for several months until, unable to stand it any longer, I must respond. There seems to be a pervasive idea that science fiction must follow the beliefs of modern day physicists in order to be considered hard "Sci-Fi." Specifically, the belief that the speed of light is an absolute limit that must be obeyed in a story or else the story should be considered science "fantasy." Balderdash! The history of scientific advancement is literally strewn with the bodies of destroyed theories. More recent corpses are the "sound barrier" and the "impossibility of heavier than air flight." Each of these theories were "proven" and accepted in their days. They were also pure unadulterated hogwash. To continue to blindly believe theories because they are passed upon by "authorities" such as Carl Sagan is a very naïve way to judge data. With the majority of physics Ph.D.s' dissertations being based on "proofs" of the theory of relativity, the chances that alternative lines of research will be funded is next to nil. After all, do you think that dear Carl is going to support people who might prove that the basis of his prestige is false?

The limits of Science Fiction are non-existent. It must not be held down by "critics" (another term for failed writers) or others with a *vested* interest in current beliefs.

Best,

Steve Strode
West Jordan, UT

I don't suppose it will do any good

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to say so—one—more—time, but you don't compare engineering problems like the sound barrier and heavier-than-air flight to basic laws of nature like the speed of light limit. At least scientific literates don't. As for Carl Sagan, he's one of the most brilliant scientists I know and I am quite certain he can survive your disapproval.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

My wife and I have enjoyed your magazine for many years and we hope it will continue for many more. The December '87 issue was a particularly good one, so much so that I could not resist booting up the old Apple and writing you about it.

As readers and viewers of science fiction we tend to forget one important scientific fact as we happily indulge in intergalactic adventures on strange and exotic planets, and that is the high probability that we never will "reach the stars." The fact is that they're just too damn far away. Jack McDevitt's story was like a dash of ice water in the face, even though he did hold out a tendril of hope at the end. The future setting that he envisions in "To Hell With the Stars" is worthy of the future aspirations of the human race. Let's hope it turns out that way.

The other story we particularly enjoyed was "Silent Night" by Ben Bova. Inasmuch as the genre of SF is a kind of wish fulfillment, the concept of such a peacekeeping force is an attractive one. It is interesting that the story is set in Ottawa, Ontario. Could it be that Mr. Bova is aware of Canada's efforts at peacekeeping in such trouble spots as Cypress and Egypt?

Thanks again for the years of enjoyable reading you have given us.

Sincerely,

Angus McCracken
Okanagan Falls
Canada

I agree. The stars are too far away. However, by literary convention, science fiction allows two "impossibilities"—faster than light travel, and time travel—and having indulged in both, myself (in stories), I can't knock it. However, in real life, *I believe neither is possible.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been meaning to write to you for a long time to tell you how much I enjoy your magazine. For a writer-in-training like me it is a manual of good examples. The magazine led me to read your robot books and stories. They opened up a whole new world (excuse the tired phrase) for me.

Having said all that, I also have to admit that I am disappointed in you. In your February editorial you refer to handicapped children as "burdens" and you suggest that such "imperfect" children should be aborted. If my mother had done so, I would not be alive now. I was born premature and had Cerebral Palsy. The doctors told my mother I would probably die. I didn't. She named me Joy. I am now nineteen. I make straight A's in college. There are many handicapped peo-

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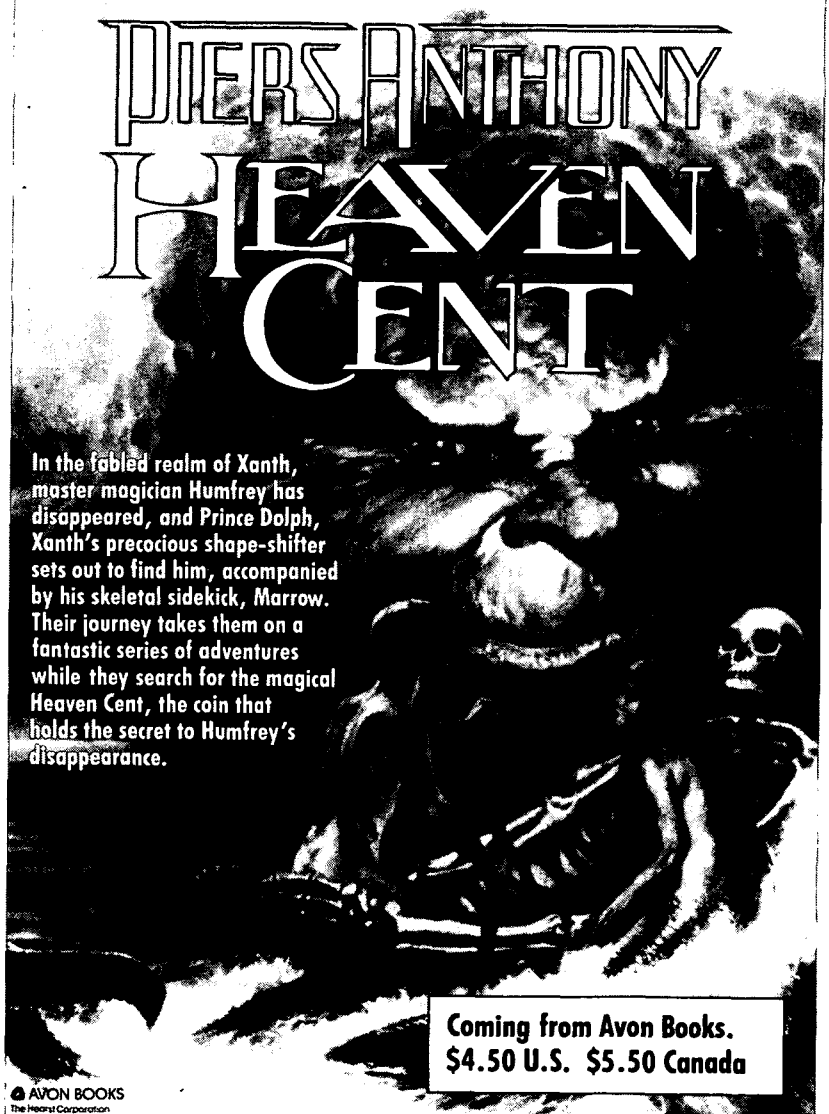

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ple worse off than I am but we are *not* burdens. We have contributions to make and we *all* deserve a chance.

It really hurts to hear such language from a man I have respected more than I can say. We have to fight intolerance and fear every day of our lives. I didn't expect this from you.

Joy Ellen Parker

Your mother had the capacity for raising a handicapped child, and you had the capacity for making up for your handicap. That is not necessarily a general rule. Many people don't have the capacity and they must judge for themselves whether they can bear what they *might consider an unbearable burden. People are* different, *and it is the essence of humanity that we allow for the differences.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I have been reading *IAsfm* from the very first issue and I'm proud to say that I have a complete collection of your magazine, except for the Sept., Oct. '81 issues and the March, June, and Sept. '86 issues. Don't ask me what catastrophic events occurred in my life to cause me to miss these issues. Rest assured that the events could make Stephen King shudder.

In all this time I have followed the growth of your magazine and can say, that while at times I was doubtful as to some of the changes you have undergone, I am as pleased with your magazine today as I was with the first issue.

Please don't think of me as a doting fan, pleased with anything you do; there have been changes in format that made me question the future of your publication. At the same time I have been willing to weather the changes with you and as I have already said, I am quite pleased with the job you and your staff have done.

After being a silent fan for so long what, you may ask, finally moved me to warm up my word processor long enough to write? There are two reasons. Number one, I finished reading *I, Robot: The Movie* and after several weeks of reflection, I now feel that something needs to be done about this great injustice to the entire science fiction family. I would like to hear more on the events surrounding Mr. Ellison's problems trying to get the story onto the screen.

How about starting an organization to raise money in an attempt to wrest the script from the clutches of the ignorant and place it on the screen ourselves? Count me in on any attempt to storm the castle via nasty letters, boycotts, or even (shudder) monetary donations. Let's go get 'em!!!

Thanks all for the pleasure you bring.

Ricky Morgan
Montgomery, AL

The trouble with forcing something like Harlan's screenplay (which is incredibly imaginative) on a reluctant movie industry is that somehow we would have to raise a minimum of thirty million dollars. I suspect that's why the movie industry is reluctant and why we won't get anywhere.

—Isaac Asimov

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Dear Sirs,

The last three issues of 1987 were the best Christmas presents in years. Thank you, thank you, thank you for *I, Robot: The Movie.* Surely there must be *one* SF reader out there with enough influence or money to get *I, Robot* filmed! The screenplay was brilliant fiction, an incredibly good adaptation, and would make a fantastic movie. It's not too often that I find myself conscious of just how damned good a story is while I'm reading it. And perhaps each NASA manager needs to read Jack McDevitt's "To Hell With The Stars" to remember their purpose and recapture the vision that animated the space program of the 1960s.

These past three issues (November, December, and Mid-December) featured many other fine stories, such as Susan Palwick's "Ever After," Dean Whitlock's "Roadkill," and Lucius Shepard's "Shades." I've come to expect such quality from *IAsfm.* The Ellison serial, however, transcended any and all expectations. Such gems come along far too infrequently. Thank you for publishing it.

Best wishes,

Michael Sklar
Ann Arbor, MI

See what happens when a screen writer has good material to work with!

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov and The Editorial Hordes:

In the September 1986 issue, April Kihlstrom refuted the common canard that no pre-1969 SF story depicted a first moon landing as being carried live on television. (She cited Arthur C. Clarke's *Master of Space,* dated 1961, apparently not realizing that this was simply a retitling of his 1951 novel *Prelude to Space,* but no matter.) In the April 1987 issue, Scott Jarrett added seven pre-1957 stories to the list, the earliest being J. Schlossel's "To the Moon by Proxy" in a 1928 *Amazing.*

I recently found an even earlier example. The March 9, 1918, issue of *All-Story Weekly* (a companion to *Argosy*) carried "The Planeteer," the first published story of Homer Eon Flint, later to be known as the author (with Austin Hall) of *The Blind Spot.* "The Planeteer" seems not to have been reprinted since, though I recall that readers of the old *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* used to often suggest its revival in the pages of that magazine. I finally got the chance to read it through the courtesy of a friend in Washington, who supplied a photocopy from the Library of Congress.

The planeteer of the title is a super-scientist who solves the approaching problem of Earth's destruction by moving the entire planet into an orbit around Jupiter.

In the process of devising a means to move the Earth, said scientist almost off-handedly invents a space drive and sets off with a small crew to first the Moon and then Mars, with every moment being watched and heard back on Earth via a television device which also allows people on Earth to speak to the astronauts.

While the story is clearly in the pulp tradition, it is not without in-

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terest, even aside from the historic interest implicit in the above. (The viewpoint character—the young scientist's friend and rival—does NOT "Get The Girl," for instance, and in fact dies an offstage martyr in a sequel, thus hardly fulfilling pulp readers' expectations.)

With the seventieth anniversary of this story's publication coming up (and the twentieth of the first moon landing following) I can't help wishing someone would republish it. Prophecy is not, of course, a major function of science fiction, but this particular prophet has been too long ignored. Perhaps someone would consider an anthology of all pre-1969 stories/novel excerpts depicting televised space exploration? We Told You So!!

Sincerely,

Dennis Lien
Minneapolis, MN

Heavens, we might start a game of this sort. Thus: What was the first story that featured interstellar travel? I always thought it was E. E. Smith's "Skylark of Space" (1928). Could there have been something earlier? (Forget Voltaire's "Micromegas"; that was strictly satire, and I'm talking real science fiction.)

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner,

I've missed the poetry in the November and December issues, but it was worth it for *I, Robot*. "Uncle Dobbin's Parrot Fair" by de Lint was both charming and very entertaining, with some clever juxtapositions. "To Hell With the Stars" by McDevitt was a great idea well-executed.

It's getting close to your readers' award issue again, and though it's probably too late for this year, how about considering poetry as part of the process. After all, you publish more poems than you do novellas, and poems are already listed in your yearly index.

Hope all goes well.

Best,

Bruce Boston
Albany, CA

My own feeling is that it is very hard to judge poetry, but that may be only because I have a tin ear for it. At least, anything after Swinburne leaves me confused. However, I'll throw this ball to the Chestertonian Gardner. Let him decide.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

I have just finished reading the January 1988 issue of *IAsfm*, and I feel that I must comment on Norman Spinrad's On Books column. After reading Mr. Spinrad's "The Emperor of Everything," I feel that I must respectfully cry that the emperor has no clothes.

The thoughts behind the column in question were extremely interesting and well thought out. As I read I thought to myself that Mr. Spinrad had done an admirable job in researching and presenting this loving look at one of literature's most enduring themes. I very much enjoyed the studies of *The Stars My Destination* and the *Dune* books as they related to the Emperor of Everything theme. I was even happy with the insight into the cre-

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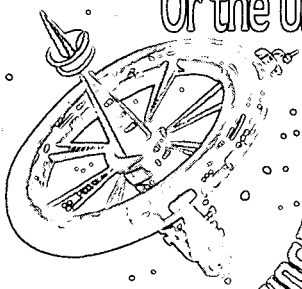

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ation of Mr. Spinrad's own *The Iron Dream* as a variation on the theme. Where I almost threw the magazine across the room was where Mr. Spinrad chose to use his essay as a jumping-off place into yet another attack on the works of Orson Scott Card.

I don't believe that I need to come to the rescue of Mr. Card. He could certainly do a much better job of defending himself than an insignificant letterhack such as I. My objection is to Mr. Spinrad's continued attacks on a single writer in his columns. Perhaps some criticism of *Ender's Game* as just another tiresome variant on the E of E theme is valid, but then attacking *Speaker for the Dead* on the same grounds seems to be taking the analogy a bit too far. *Speaker for the Dead* has so little connection with the Emperor Theme that to my reading Mr. Spinrad seems to be indulging in the logical fallacy of guilt by association. Why should Mr. Spinrad pick out Orson Scott Card's work as the *only* example of badly rendered Emperor of Everything in his column, and ignore the tons of slushpile doggie-doo that creep onto the bookstore shelves each year? Mr. Spinrad was certainly eloquent in his denunciation of *Ender's Game* in his column "Science Fiction Versus Sci-Fi," and now only slightly more than a year later he returns with another swipe at *Ender's Game* and its sequel. I don't expect a literary criticism column to be all sweetness and light, but it should not be a venue for the venting of one writer's continued attacks on another. At least "The Emperor of Everything" ends with a hopeful note about Card's latest novel. I hope that Mr. Spinrad had gotten what he had to say off his chest, and can get back to being an insightful illuminator of the state of the art of science fiction writing.

Your Faithful Reader,

Gary R. Robe
Franklin, KY

I strongly suspect that Orson can survive Norman's attacks, if that's what they are. I haven't seen anyone attain Orson Scott Card's popularity with both readers and critics since Robert Heinlein at his peak forty years ago.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov, Sweet Sheila, and Chestertonian Gardner:

You know, as the years go by, *IAsfm* just keeps getting better and better. I can't possibly complain about your choice of stories, even though I enjoy some much more than others, but since you have such a wide readership, you need a broad spectrum—even so, there are some folks that refuse to recognize superior performance. There is one thing that has bothered *me* from time to time and, trivial as it is, I can't let it go by again.

Illustrations! Isn't there a rule that requires illustrators to *read* the stories that they illustrate? It doesn't happen very often, but from time to time I'll be reading along about this dandy blond hero and there, big as life, is an illustration of a dark-haired hero! Or a gorgeous alien female in strange attire, and there she is in a mini-skirt and tank top! Or, exploring an unknown star system on a strange

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planet with weird plant life, we find ourselves looking at an illustration of a pine forest . . . but this is really too much!

While delightedly renewing my acquaintance with Susan Calvin I am interrupted by an illustration that stops me cold. I am, of course, referring to Harlan Ellison's filmscript of *I, Robot: The Movie*. In Part Two on page 183 in the December '87 issue there is a full-page illustration of what can only be called an OCTAHEDRAL building when, right there in the script, a TETRAHEDRAL building is called for. (Even a PYRAMID would be more understandable.) Wouldn't you think that if an artist wasn't sure of her/his subject that s/he would do a bit of research?

Harlan Ellison, in a recent column, refers to smart aleck readers who write complaining about nitpicky things and/or things that are simply over their heads, who insist on being heard in order to display their imagined knowledge and intelligence. He uses the word "pecksniffery." I was, until now, unaware of "pecksniffery" (not the trait, the word). I have joyfully added it to my collection of perfectly delightful words. It conjures up such a lovely picture. I do not, however, want to be accused of pecksniffery. 'Nuff said.

Is there any chance at all that *I, Robot: The Movie* will ever be filmed? I certainly hope so, and I hope that I'm still around to enjoy it. Great job! Mr. Ellison. I just wish you had used another type of response to that vegetable-headed idiot!

With sincere good wishes for you all.

Marj O'Driscoll
South Pekin, IL

PS: I wonder what the artist would have done with a "tesseractal" building?

The most notable character in Charles Dickens' Martin Chuzzlewit *is Seth Pecksniff, who is the consummate hypocrite. Hence, "pecksniffery" is a particularly contemptible type of hypocrisy. However, the Oxford English Dictionary mentions, in passing, "Picksniff" as an insignificant, paltry, contemptible person.*

—Isaac Asimov

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Nyuk-Nyuk-Nyuk.

I'd be the first one to admit that this column doesn't always toe the mark as far as subject matter. Quite intentionally, it has been dedicated to looking at games that stretch the dimensions and technology of gaming, whether it's a sophisticated boardgame or knock-your-socks-off graphics or gameplay. And since my mailbag hasn't been getting stuffed with letters of protest, I plan on continuing to do just that.

But the Three Stooges . . . ? Well, just give me a minute to explain . . .

There's a company called Cinemaware which made a tremendous splash in the computer game world with their game *Defender of the Crown*. *Defender's* graphics, featuring dazzling jousting sequences, medieval fanfares, and swashbuckling action, impressed everyone who saw it. I selected it as one of the first Science Fiction Games of the Year, but it received a lot of other attention and awards since its release.

There were some cavils about the gameplay—it was extremely difficult to master the joust—and some reviewers felt that the play of the game didn't match the look of it. But still, this was a major breakthrough in a sometimes shopworn technology.

Enter *The Three Stooges*. *The Three Stooges* is the latest release from Cinemaware (Cinemaware Corp., 4165 Thousand Oaks Blvd. Westlake Village, CA 91362), and the graphics are even more remarkable than *Defender*. Except that this time the gameplay is just as wonderful.

Cinemaware calls the game an "Interactive Movie," and it certainly has the feel of something other than a computer game.

When I was in my Wonder years, back in Flatbush, someone named Officer Joe Bolton hosted the local station's presentation of Stooge shorts. Of course, back then parents didn't seem overly concerned about all the face-slapping and eye-poking, and the Three Stooges inspired all sorts of physical mayhem in elementary school playgrounds everywhere. Eventually there was some protest, and Officer Joe issued injunctions to the boys and girls not to try any of the Stooges' stunts. But even though he was a policeman, some of us couldn't be deterred from bonking other kids on the head.

The game is a lovingly detailed

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re-creation of the over thirty-year run of the Three Stooges. The introduction to the game manual quotes Leonard Maltin, who observed that the public is made up of two groups, "one composed of persons who laugh at the Three Stooges and the other made up of those who wonder why?"

But even if you fall into the latter group, this game is decidedly worth a look.

The plot is simple and good-natured, like many of the Stooges' shorts. Some dear old lady named Ma is about to lose her orphanage because she can't pay the rent to a Mr. Fleecem. So Moe, Larry, and Curly set off to earn, find, or stumble upon enough money to help Ma and her dear sweet children.

As the Stooges walk down the street icons flash overhead. These represent assorted job opportunities (and I use the term loosely) and events that may help the trio on their altruistic quest. Pressing the joystick button stops a moving hand over an icon (and not always on the one you wanted).

The Stooges get a chance to work in a hospital, pushing patients through the crowded corridors. As things speed up the hospital corridors begin to resemble Indianapolis speedway.

Curly gets a chance to enter an Oyster Stew Eating Contest while a very persistent oyster tries to stop him. There's also Pie Fight when they play caterers and a boxing match (where Curly can only fight if he hears the melody "Pop Goes the Weasel"—it drives him wild). There's even a trivia quiz that will test your knowledge of Stoogedom (and award you with a hearty "lame brain" if you get a question wrong).

And, never fear, in between there are plenty of opportunities for some crazy nonsense called the "slapping game" which features Moe trying to slap, poke, punch, or kick the other Stooges.

Well, you get the idea. And just why, you're perhaps wondering, am I bringing this admittedly juvenile exercise to your attention? The answer is quite simple.

It's state-of-the-art. The screens, especially on the Amiga version, are stunning. But even on the lowly Commodore, the game looks terrific. Some sequences, such as Curly's battle with the oyster, will make you laugh out loud.

But besides just looking good, the game is fun, engaging . . . a real pleasure to play. There's so much action in the game, from the hospital derby to the cannonading pies, that the game always seems fresh. There's very little down time—waiting for the next game sequence. And believe me when I say that this isn't all that common an experience with computer games. Something this much fun should be pounced on.

Cinemaware has other exciting projects on the board, including a very pulp-looking extravaganza called *Rocket Ranger*, with a 30s SF feel to it. Stay tuned.●

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THE LAST THUNDER HORSE WEST OF THE MISSISSIPPI

by Sharon N. Farber

Sharon N. Farber's science fiction career began with the publication of her story, "Born Again" in our May-June 1978 issue. We think it's only fitting that we celebrate her tenth anniversary (albeit a bit late) with this offbeat tale of a wild west that could only be found in a slightly altered universe.

art: Bob Walters

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The evening-suited men moved into the lounge. "I have not seen any recent publications by you on fossils, Professor Leidy," a German-accented voice said. "Will you be on another collection trip to the West this year?"

"Hah!" another man commented. "Leidy's given up paleontology and gone back to microscopic studies—they're safer."

"Safer? Of course. You refer to your hostile savages . . ."

"No, not the Indians. I mean our battling paleontologists."

The German gazed in bewilderment at the smiling company.

A distinguished-looking older man said, "Please, gentlemen. I don't wish to cite personalities . . ."

"Come now, Leidy, we all know who has driven you from your field. The feuding fossil hunters. Marsh with his uncle Peabody's fortune—he would outbid you for your grandmother's skull."

"Have you heard the joke? Marsh is unmarried because he wouldn't be happy with one wife. He would want a collection."

The assemblage laughed. The angry scientist continued, "And then there's Cope. Absolutely brilliant. He can stare over your shoulder at a bone, memorize its salient features, then rush into publication a description of *your* fossil."

Leidy smiled ruefully at the German. "Now you've heard two good reasons why I have abandoned vertebrate paleontology."

More scientists were entering the lounge as the Academy meeting concluded. Leidy withdrew an envelope from his inner coat pocket.

"Formerly every fossil discovered in the States was sent to me. Now people send to Marsh and Cope and let them bid. But I still receive the occasional letter." He read, " 'Dear Professor Leidy.' The spelling, gentlemen, is unique. My rendition cannot do it justice—'Dear Professor Leidy. I hear as you like strange animals. Well Johnny and Dave kilt all the big ones but me and Sairie caught a baby down the gulch out Watson Crick. Doc Watson says it looks to be a vertebrate'—I believe he intends vertebrate; the spelling is so creative I can't really be sure—'but he never seed a lizard tall as a horse before and said we should write you. If you want to see it you come to Coyote near Zak City and ask. Anyone knows me.' It's signed 'Charley Doppler.' "

The room had fallen silent while Leidy read the strange missive; a humming began as conversations resumed.

"Doppler. Surely no relation to Christian Doppler of Prague?"

"Probably not," a balding man said. "Have you heard how his formulae may be used to compute the distance to various stars by . . ."

Leidy returned the letter to his pocket.

Two men on opposite sides of the lounge separately checked their

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pocket watches, bid their companions hasty farewells, and rushed out to locate train schedules.

That same evening a less elegant social occasion took place some fifteen hundred miles to the west, at the Dopplers' ranch on the banks of the Foulwater. Dr. Watson, the local homeopath, had just completed his regular weekly examination of Ma Doppler.

"She gonna make it?" her oldest son asked solicitously. Johnny Doppler deserved his place on the wall of every frontier jail and post office, but he was second to none in filial devotion.

"Ma's all right, ain't she, Doc?" Young Charley's question tagged along behind his elder's. Both brothers had black hair and white faces which never tanned, leading to Johnny's prison-pallor and Charley's burnt redness.

"Hmmn," the doctor said, seating himself at the whitewashed table and pouring a mixed drink—half whiskey and half *Essence of Frankincense*. He sipped, then added another jolt of the patent medicine. "Well, I tell you, boys, I think she's got a number of years left amongst the earthly host. You know widows, they act touchy, that's all."

"Sure, look at Dave's wife."

"She's not technically a widow, Charley. Red-Eye Dave is still alive, you see, even if he does tend to avoid Kate's company." The doctor sloshed some *Essence of Frankincense* onto the table and watched the whitewash dissolve. "How is Dave?"

"Ain't here."

"Oh? Your mother tends to worry about you boys when you're away."

Johnny nodded slowly, eyes shifting back and forth as if he expected his doctor or his brother to draw on him. "Ma always had a fit when me and Dave'd go back to the war."

Doc shuddered. He'd served with Johnny Doppler and Red-Eye Dave Savage a good ten, twelve years earlier. Johnny had been the Missouri irregulars' most feared sniper. His cousin, though, had never been sober enough for the precision work of sniping. Dave's specialty had been demolitions, his enthusiasm for blowing things up helped by his willingness to work with short fuses.

War memories always made Doc uncomfortable. He rose, saying, "Thanks for the drink, friends. I'll send some more medicine over tomorrow; meantime, make sure she gets her *Essence of Frankincense* regular." He fingered the label with the smiling Indian Princess and the small type tributes, one from Mrs. Joseph Doppler herself. Then he left.

Charley called after him, "Say Doc, I'll get the medicine. I'll be training my big lizard again tomorrow."

Johnny scowled. "You're a fool wastin' time over there, kid."

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"I'll learn it to pull the plow, you'll see," Charley whined.

His brother sighed. Charley wanted to be a farmer. Charley could be very trying sometimes.

The tracks into Zak City were lined with the bleached bones of buffalo shot from train windows by bored passengers. Not a single living buffalo had been seen from the time the train left civilization to the time it pulled into Zak City and disgorged its passengers.

Two of those passengers caught sight of each other at opposite ends of the boardwalk station, and scowled. They looked very different from the evening-suited images they had presented at the scientific meeting the previous week. Both were five feet, ten inches, the pudgy man by virtue of the heels on his high hunting boots (guaranteed rattlesnake proof). Above the expensive footwear he presented an intentionally disreputable appearance, with slouch hat, corduroy suit, and a shooting jacket with the top button fastened and the sides flared out to either side of his substantial belly. A well-thumbed copy of *The Prairie Traveller* peeked out of one capacious pocket. He carried a pair of navy revolvers, a Sharps .50 caliber cavalry carbine, and a large hunting knife, and his small wide-set blue eyes were narrowed in advertisement of his toughness. He had a full reddish beard, a half-bald head, and a face with no apparent bone structure.

The other man presented a less western, less martial picture. He was a decade younger, in his early thirties, and unarmed. His conservative suit conveyed the image of a foreign scholar. He had an oval face, trimmed beard, and thick brown hair.

Each man stared at the other, distance diluting their malign expressions, then picked up their respective carpetbags and stalked off in different directions.

The pudgy man found his way to a busy saloon. The customers had spilled out into the street and were engaged in conversation with some women in the second story of the building opposite. The man stopped before a small cavalry private.

"I am Professor O.C. Marsh of Yale University, authorized by the Secretary of the Army to seek supplies and men from any government outpost." He patted the pocket in which he carried letters of introduction to the military, railroad officials, politicians, and sundry other frontier luminaries. "How do I locate the army?"

"Enlist."

"Where is your commanding officer?"

"Don't know. I deserted."

"I wish to hire a guide to take me to Coyote." He pronounced it carefully with two syllables, to show he was not a greenhorn.

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The raucous crowd fell silent. Finally someone said, "You crazy? Coyote? there's easier ways underground."

"I need a guide to Coyote, where I must meet a Mr. Doppler."

The silence became a horrified mutter, and the crowd melted away until only Marsh and one other stood there. The stranger was over six feet tall, redolent of whiskey, and dressed like a Texas ranger—high-heeled boots with huge spurs, bright red sash with a brace of pistols, and broad-brimmed hat. He said, "*Who* yuh wanta meet?"

"A Mister Charles Doppler."

"Charley?" He shook his head incredulously. "Charley? He ain't much."

"You are acquainted with him?"

"Acquai—acquait—he's muh cousin! I stole Charley his first long pants."

"Will you take me to him?" Marsh held up a shiny dollar. "It is worth $3 per day. Mister . . . ?"

"Savage. Red-Eye Dave Savage. Maybe you seen a novel about me? You can call me Red-Eye." He grabbed at the coin.

"Fine, Red-Eye. Now let us see to procuring supplies." They began walking down the street, Marsh saying, "You know, I am a personal friend of Buffalo Bill Cody . . ."

Heading north of the tracks, the neatly-dressed gentleman was presented with a vista of well-tended plank houses and empty streets. Two saddled horses nibbled the grass growing beside a church. A buckskinned, long-haired scout with hat over face leaned against a post. An Indian woman sat beside the scout, nursing a chubby baby which rather resembled a beardless President Grant. The man paused to admire the anthropologically-interesting scene.

Without looking up, the squaw asked, "May I be of service?"

He jerked back in surprise. "Uh, yes. Do you know the way to Coyote?" His pronunciation had the three syllables used in the Southwest and Pacific Coast.

"Certainly I do."

He sighed. "What *is* the way to Coyote?"

The woman smiled sweetly. "The way *out* of Coyote is in a coffin. Horse in, hearse out."

He said, "Madam, a scientist is prepared to face the dangers of the unknown in order to acquire knowledge."

The scout stirred, and muttered a question in Lakota. The Indian woman listened, then asked, "Do you mean that you are a Natural Philosopher?"

"I have been elected fellow of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, the American Philosophical Society, the National Academy

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of Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Edward Drinker Cope, madam, at your service." He bowed, freezing the moment in his mind so that he could send a humorous description of it to his daughter.

The scout again spoke Lakota into the hat. The woman translated. "Are you familiar with Man Who Picks Up Bones Running?"

"Frederick Hayden? I was on his survey."

More mumbling.

"Do you know Perfesser Leidy?"

"I studied under him. In fact, I am here because of a letter he received."

The scout sprung upright, revealing a tanned, scarred face with delicate female features. "I done scouted for Man Who Picks Up Bones Running in '68." She stuck out a hand for a vigorous shaking.

Cope said delightedly, "Then you must be Chokecherry Sairie, the Wilderness Philosopher." He had seen dime-novels devoted to her adventures. The petite, corsetted women of the illustrations bore not the slightest resemblance to their inspiration.

The Indian also introduced herself. "I'm Jessie Crooked-Knife. My husband is a perfesser also—Perfesser Lancelot D'arcy Daid, manufacturer and proprietor of *Essence of Frankincense*, the Old Indian Princess' Authentic Miracle Cure for Whatever Ails You and Female Troubles As Well. I'm the Indian Princess."

Cope bowed once again.

Sairie was twisting the fringe on her left sleeve. "Y'come to see Charley's lizard? Let's go." She spoke rapidly to Jessie in Lakota, then lashed Cope's carpet bag behind the saddle of a Roman-nosed bay mare.

Jessie said, "Sairie was headed south to visit Frisco Flush and the Goodenough Kid, but she has changed her plans. She has always enjoyed scouting for scientific parties. You are borrowing my horse Boadicea; watch out, she puffs when you girth her. Sairie doesn't speak English very well; she was raised by wolves, you know."

On that surprising note Sairie leapt onto her small paint gelding, gestured for Cope to swing aboard the mare, and trotted off. Jessie Crooked-Knife switched her baby to her right arm, and waved goodbye.

As they trotted along the high prairies, Cope acquired the story of the giant lizard, monosyllable by monosyllable. The Doppler Gang had found a herd of the lizards, or "thunder horses" as Sairie called them, grazing peacefully in a deserted area near Foulwater. Johnny and Dave had left all but one for the buzzards.

Sairie tried to describe the beasts. "Big feet. Eyes like bird. Hips sort of like bird, but got four legs." She paused, frustrated, and waved her arms about.

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"I think I understand," Cope said encouragingly. He didn't.

"Real big. Teeth like horse, not wolf."

"An herbivore—vegetarian—grass eater?"

"Yeah. Like big bones all over, but smaller."

"Big . . . ?"

She held her arm up a good eight feet from the ground. "Bones, real big. All over. Get in way."

Cope's eyes lit up with something between avarice and glee.

They camped at dusk and ate a meal of pemmican. Cope stared at the spectacular sunset and began to talk of his rival.

"Marsh is curator of the museum at Yale only because his uncle built it and pays his allowance. The man won't stir into Indian territory without an army escort."

"You?"

"Yes, I have done so. I'm a Quaker; I don't bear arms. Once I pacified a war party with my false teeth . . ."

Sairie sat up happily. "Magic Tooth!"

Content that his reputation had preceded him, Cope continued. "Marsh purchases so many fossils that some have never been unpacked. He does not understand anatomy—an army of myrmidons studies his specimens and writes his papers. They are negligently paid and forbidden to carry on their own researches . . ." He did not include the fact that he had attempted to stir them to revolt.

"Marsh doesn't read the journals, leading him to duplicate others' work. Yet, with all this, they call him a scientist! In '72 Mudge intended to send me the 'bird with teeth' which has made Marsh's reputation. Marsh heard of the fossils and convinced Mudge to give them to him. At Bridger Basin his men took my bones. And he has instructed his collectors to smash duplicates and other bones—to actually *destroy fossils* to keep them from me!"

Sairie, listening to this tirade in the flickering of the dying campfire, muttered "hang him." As a consequence of that comment, after a sleep punctuated with nightmares in which the originals of his fossils tormented him, Cope greeted Sairie with "I wish *thee* a pleasant morning. Shall I name the giant lizard in thy honor, Miss Chokecherry?"

"Already named Joe. For Joe." She patted her pinto's neck.

Cope said, "Hmmn. *Josaurus*. Why not? It will send them scurrying to their Greek lexicons. I once named a species *Cophater*, and a friend, in desperation, asked me what it meant. I told him it was in honor of the Cope haters."

They rode on towards Coyote, comparing their knowledge of the animals they saw. Cope would furnish their genus and species as well as

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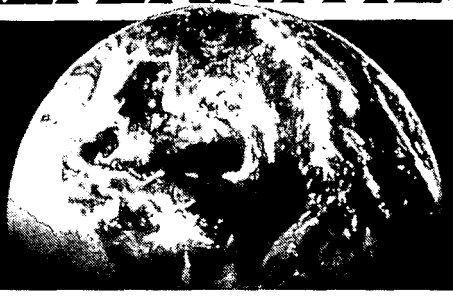
ONE EARTH TO RISK.
ANOTHER TO CONQUER.

ALTERNITIES



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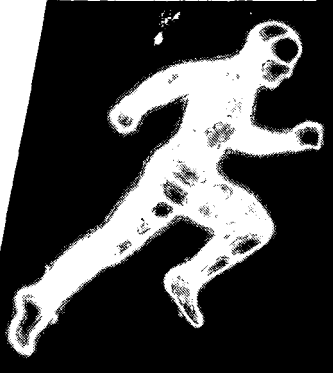

ACE OCTOBER

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details of their evolutionary adaptations; Sairie would supply their personal habits, and a judgment on how they tasted.

Twenty-five miles nearer Zak City, Marsh was also enjoying his morning. The previous day had been spent in the purchase of supplies: a large wagon, harness and four-horse team, $520; provisions and camp utensils, $175; riding horse, $75. The new horse was tied behind the wagon with Red-Eye Dave Savage's chestnut Lightning. Red-Eye drove and his employer rode shotgun.

Marsh was an accomplished raconteur, with a fund of exciting anecdotes from his earlier western expeditions. Red-Eye, however, had spent his advance the night before, and was not the best of audiences. Every so often he took a swig of *Essence of Frankincense*, its herbs helping not so much as its alcoholic content.

". . . the colonel and his officers all complimented me on my feat. And I am now an army legend, the only man to shoot three buffalo from an ambulance. It happened in '70 but is still a topic of . . . Stop!"

Red-Eye pulled back on the reins and grabbed for a pistol. "Injuns? Rannies?"

"Sshh." Marsh pointed to a lone buffalo, grazing some distance away. Raising his carbine, he took careful aim and fired. The animal sank to its knees, mooed once, and died.

"Dang if you don't shoot like a Missouri bushwhacker!" Red-Eye crowed.

Marsh dissected out the buffalo's tongue, wrapping it in cloth. They enjoyed it that night at supper, while Marsh ran through an inventory of his friends. "Darwin, you've heard of Darwin? Well, he's quite important. He sent me congratulations on a paper. Huxley also greatly admires my work, especially my studies on the evolution of horses."

Red-Eye Dave was taken aback by that phrase. He looked over at Lightning, hobbled near the wagon, suspicious that at any second the beast might evolve, whatever that was. He was thankful for the security of the bottle of *Essence of Frankincense* clasped firmly in his hand.

"In fact, my elucidation of equine evolution has won me praise from all quarters, many unique. Brigham Young . . ."

"I hearda him," Red-Eye muttered.

". . . has named me a Defender of the Faith. It appears that *The Book of Mormon* mentioned horses in ancient America, and my fossil studies have inadvertently supported his religion. I had quite a friendly welcome in Salt Lake City . . ."

Red-Eye shuddered. Salt Lake made him think of polygamy, polygamy made him think of wives, and wives made him think of Kate, who was

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waiting at their destination and who would, no doubt, have things to say to him. He chugged some more healing brew.

That sunset found Cope and Sairie at the Doppler ranch, a couple miles out of Coyote. The log cabin, Kate Savage's sod dugout, and the palatial barn were surrounded by a wooden palisade in moderate disrepair. The gate had fallen off the hinges and was pushed to one side.

Charley sat hunkered up to the table. He had never been so excited in his life; even killing his first (and so far only) man during the Hoedown Showdown had not been so thrilling as this conversation with a real live Natural Philosopher. Cope was discussing the wagon they would need to transport the lizard to the railroad. Charley broke in, "I c'n go, Ma, really, can't I?"

Ma Doppler, looking up from her dogeared copy of *Beachs Home Eclectic Doctor*, said, "I don't know, Charley. You're young to go traipsing off to Philadelphy."

"But someone's gotta take care of Joe, and Doc here says he'll innerduce me to the Academy and I c'n go to college."

"Don't fret yore Ma, Charley." Johnny's voice was like a file scratching a notch in cold gun metal.

"I didn't mean no wrong," Charley whined.

Cope finished a sketch of the prehistoric sloth he had been describing, and passed it to the boy. He had drawn Charley, recognizable even without the label in Cope's illegible handwriting, beside the sloth to show the scale. Charley passed it around.

"I'd like t'hunt that," Johnny said. "Where'd I find him?"

"I fear the last died many, many years ago."

"Couldn't fit aboard the Ark in the Deluge," Ma Doppler said. "Remember your Bible, son." Cope smiled slightly. His own religious convictions had led him to discount Darwin for Lamarckian or "mechanical" evolution.

The door swung open and Johnny spun a pistol to cover it. Sairie entered carrying a child, age and sex indeterminate. She held it up for their inspection.

"That's little Johnny, or maybe Sue," Ma hazarded.

"I'm Li'l Kitty," the child howled in protest.

Sairie said, "Don't fool with horses." She dropped Kitty, who landed on her feet and scooted out of the cabin. Charley leaned towards the astonished Cope. "That's one of Red-Eye Dave and Kate's. There's round about twelve Savage kids."

"Dinopaed," the scholar muttered. Sairie snorted with laughter, startling Cope. "Thee understands Greek, Miss Chokecherry?"

"Jes' some."

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Charley said with admiration, "Sairie attended Union Grammar School in Frisco for two years, right afore they stopped letting in girls."

Cope shook his head. The frontier was a fount of surprises.

At first light they rode over to Doc Watson's house. The homeopathic physician asked, "Long as you're here, need any medicine?"

"No thank you," Cope answered. "I never travel without this." He held up a handy bottle of belladonna, quinine, and opium.

"Well, if you get to feeling poorly . . ." The doctor took a wake-up swallow of *Essence of Frankincense.*

Charley led the way along Watson Crick to a small valley. It was strewn with huge fossilized bones which had been used to build a fence and a hut. Charley dodged under a fence rung—a humerus suspended between heaped vertebrae—and walked towards the lean-to. "Here Joe, here Joe . . ."

A triangular head peeked out from the door of the hut, followed by a long cylindrical neck. It fixed one unblinking eye on Charley, turned its head and stared with the other. Then Joe exited the hut, revealing a barrel-like body, thick legs with flat feet, and a long, dragging tail, and lumbered towards the boy. An astonished Cope watched as the boy fed the animal a carrot.

"Grow 'em myself," he said proudly.

"It's . . . tall."

"Tall as me. The grownup ones were two, three times as big. Here, you feed him one. Mind your fingers."

Cope held the carrot gingerly. Joe's head snaked out, yanked the carrot from his fingers, and munched contentedly as Charley tied on a rope halter.

Sairie leaned against a fence post. "Gettin' thin." Charley ran one hand through the downy brown fuzz. "You're right. I can feel his ribs. I better feed him more."

Cope was examining the bones of the hut. "These fossils are clearly from creatures like Joe, only larger. His ancestors perhaps." The remainder of the morning was spent with Cope studying the bones, identifying them, pointing out similar ones in human construction, demonstrating muscle and tendon insertions, and then referring to Joe for confirmation. Finally, replete with anatomical speculations, the three turned toward Coyote for a cool drink.

Meanwhile back at the Doppler ranch, the wagon had arrived. While Red-Eye Dave and his wife held a noisy and acrimonious reunion inside their sod dugout, Marsh held forth for the dozen or so Savage children.

"Indians believe fossilized bones to be the remnant of an extinct race

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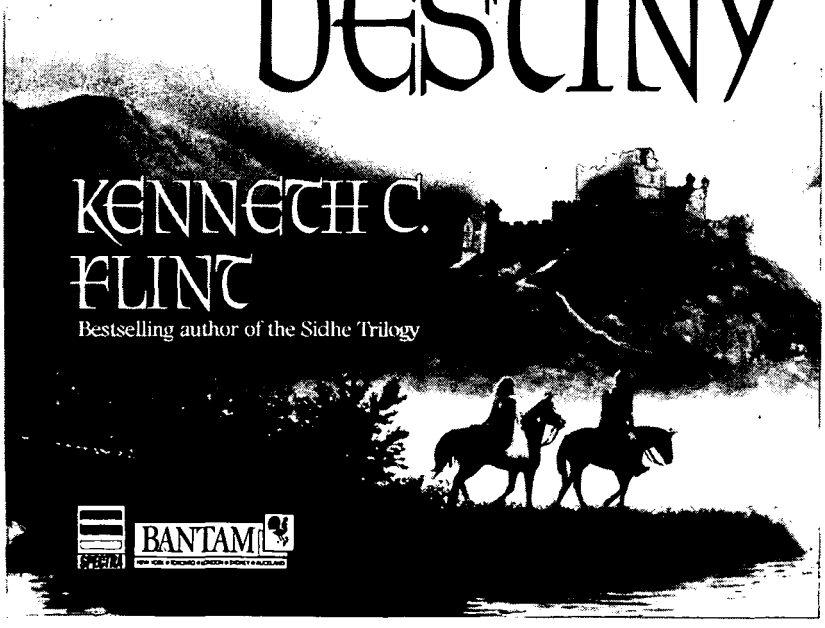

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of giants. They consider me a man of great wisdom, and call me 'Bone Medicine Man' and 'Big Bone Chief.' Chief Red Cloud is my personal friend, as is Buffalo Bill." He paused, waiting.

The oldest Savage daughter spoke. "Cousin Johnny says Buffalo Bill's a long-hair baby-face sissy."

"He does? Well . . ."

"I do," Johnny said, relishing the shiver which his voice brought.

"Of course, he only scouted for us for one day," Big Bone Chief added hastily. "I really didn't get to know him very well, and first impressions may be deceiving." *The Prairie Traveller* advised one to humor frontier roughs.

Dave Savage emerged, shaken, from his house. His wife, pregnant as usual, stood in the doorway and scowled after him. "Howdy, Johnny. Yuh met Perfesser Marsh here? He shoots like a bushwhacker. We coulda used him in the war. He wants that critter of Charley's."

"I'm sick of Charley's critter."

"I am prepared to purchase it."

Johnny smiled a thin-lipped, narrow smile that made the scientist feel like a goose in a store window. "That sounds more like it. That other feller didn't offer nothing."

"Other . . . ? About so tall—beard—that blaggart! Gad! God damn it! (Begging your pardon, ma'am.) I wish the Lord would take him! He's insane, you know. I doubted his sanity the first time I met him. Berlin in '63; he was in Europe to escape the draft." After his diatribe had run its course, Marsh and Red-Eye Dave headed towards the valley, pausing at Doc Watson's for directions. As he rode, Marsh kept up a constant stream of comments and instructions for his horse, a habit which had earned him yet another Indian nickname, "Heap Whoa Man."

Doc Watson offered some medicine. Marsh replied, "*The Prairie Traveller* says the West's fresh air is the best medicine."

"Can't sell fresh air."

"On the other hand," Marsh decided, "it would be a fine addition to my collection of Western memorabilia," and he purchased two bottles at stiff prices. The pleased physician then pointed the way down the creek, to the paddock.

Joe was in his hut, but Dave shied him out with rocks. Marsh rubbed his hands. "It's better than I'd hoped. A class of beast unknown to modern man."

"Don't look like much to me." Red-Eye suspected that education destroyed a man's sense of values.

After a short gloat, Marsh and Red-Eye remounted. "I believe a celebration might be in order, Red-Eye."

Red-Eye held out an almost full bottle of *Essence of Frankincense.*

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"No thank you."

"There's the hotel in Coyote." Red-Eye led the way. The town of Coyote was, basically, the hotel. Cope and Charley were already standing at the bar of Lowland Larry's, alleviating their thirsts with draft beer. Chokecherry Sairie was seconding their toasts with the local whiskey. Johnny Doppler sat alone with his back to the wall; his hand hovered near his holster until he identified the newcomers as his cousin and the stocky greenhorn.

"Cope!" Marsh snarled.

Cope turned and graced the other with a winning smile. "Ah, the learned Professor of Copeology at Yale, Othniel Charles Marsh." From the other's flinch, it was evident that he was not fond of his Christian names. "Join us in a toast to *Josaurus dakotae* Cope, Othniel."

"Never!"

Cope glanced sideways at his friends. "You see? He is all I told ye."

Marsh said, "Did he tell you also how he'd spy on my diggers in '72? My men made a fake skull with parts of a dozen species, buried it, and dug it up while he spied. Then he snuck down that night, examined it, and wrote a paper on the fossil's significance. The brilliant genius Dr. Cope!"

The accused man shrugged. "To err is human. Of course, the telegraph man was in your pay."

Marsh hissed, "And did he tell you of this?" He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a thin, wrinkled copy of the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. XIV. Cope stood, mouth and eyes wide, transfixed. Marsh advanced, brandishing the journal before him like a vampire-hunter brandishing a cross. Cope retreated before the journal, stopping only when he backed into the bar. The other halted before him, *Transactions* at arm's length, close enough that Cope could read the date.

" 'A report of a New Eralisaurian,' by Edward Drinker Cope," Marsh boomed. "The description of a fascinating creature which he named *Elasmosaurus* for its flexible neck and sturdy tail. He had to form an entire new order of creation to accommodate it. When he showed me his restoration, which he'd placed in the Academy Museum, I noticed that the articulations of the vertebrae were reversed."

"You fiend," Cope said through grated teeth.

"I gently suggested that he had the whole thing wrong end foremost. But it took Professor Leidy to prove to him that he'd made the neck the tail, and the tail the neck. By then he'd already described it to the American Association, restored it in the *American Naturalist*—not the most particular of journals—and the *Proceedings*, and had just published a long description in the *Transactions*."

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"I tried to recall them to correct the error."

"Yes, and I gave you back one of my copies. But I still have two more." He almost thrust the journal in the pale man's face. On the sidelines, Johnny Doppler grinned in expectation of a fight.

Chokecherry Sairie interposed herself between the scientists. "Big talk, big belly."

Red-Eye Dave Savage said, "I wouldn't draw on her, Perfesser. Sairie's tough."

"Chokecherry Sairie?" Marsh was hardpressed to maintain his usual pompous and chivalrous tone with such a female as she. "Uh, I believe you worked with General George Armstrong Custer? He's my very good friend."

"He ain't mine."

The man blushed. "Please, ma'am—you're a lady—a woman . . ."

She plucked the magazine from his hand and ripped it up, scattered the pieces onto the floor, took Cope by the elbow and left. Charley downed the last of both beers, and hurried after them.

Marsh said, "If she hadn't interfered, I believe he would have, as you westerners say, gone for me."

Red-Eye looked at the scientist's armaments. "Would you go for him?"

"Why not? I've done it in print often enough. Here, why shouldn't we make it fists, even pistols. God damn it, I want that lizard!"

Johnny Doppler's eyes narrowed in an expression of furtive thoughtfulness—in fact, had Aristotle chosen to envision a perfect form for furtive thoughtfulness, it could not have been one whit more furtive or more thoughtful than the expression Johnny Doppler wore.

Some sixty-six years later, in the penultimate chapter of a Republic Studios serial entitled *The Doppler Gang in the Big Range War*, Sheriff John Doppler walks down Main Street to a shootout with the hired thugs who have been harassing the Basque sheepherders. The actor's light-eyed, firm-jawed countenance is the very personification of nobility, determination, and self-sacrifice. The best way to visualize how Johnny looked, as he brooded on Marsh's desire to own Joe, is to remember that actor in his finest screen moment, and then rotate it 180 degrees.

Johnny rose and strode the three yards to where Marsh and Red-Eye stood. "How much you want the lizard?"

"Very much. I am prepared to pay $350."

Johnny answered, "Too bad. That Quaker slick's got first crack. Raw deal." He clapped Marsh on one beefy shoulder, winked at Red-Eye, and left the saloon.

The pudgy man said, "Hell and damnation. It is bad enough I cannot have the animal. But for Cope to . . . I would do anything to keep it from him!"

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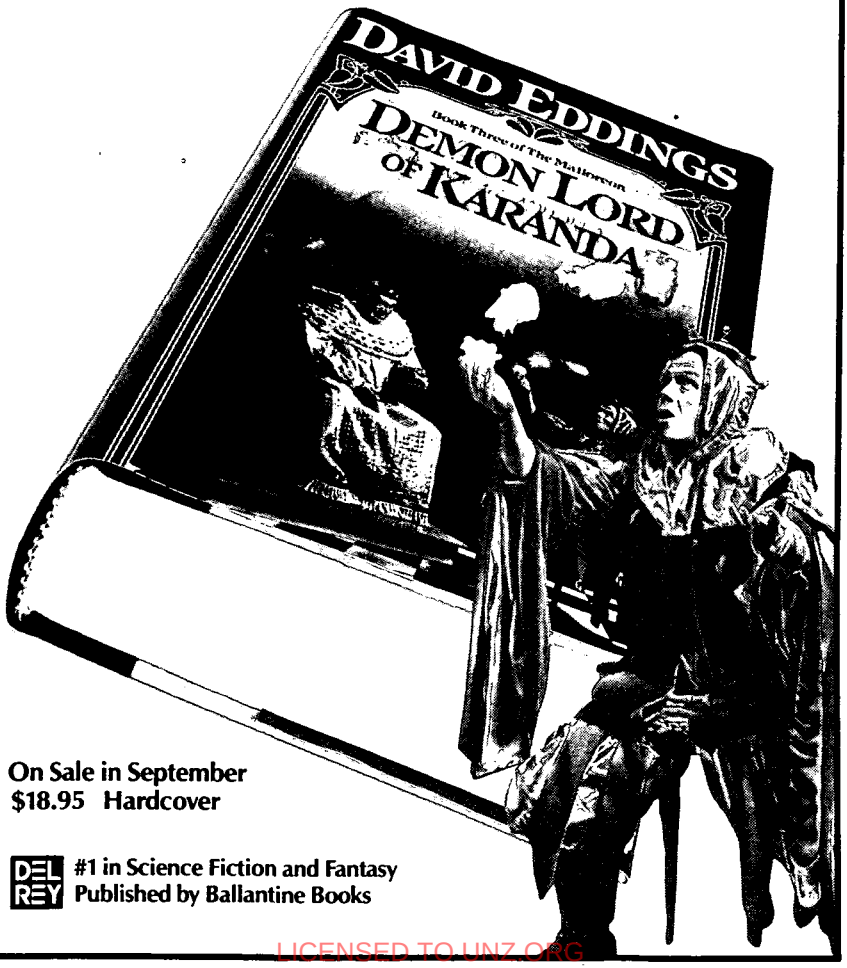

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"Would you now?" Red-Eye asked. "Well well. Tell yuh what, Perfesser, you stay here at Lowlife Larry's tonight, they got better accom— accommer—beds than out the ranch, and I'll come by tomorrow morning with good news. Hey, Larry, set muh friend up." A bewildered Marsh watched his hireling lurch from the saloon. Then he ordered a slug of imported Missouri whiskey, and fell to conversing with the bartender about their mutual acquaintance General Custer.

Charley and Cope rode back towards the Foulwater. "Why has Miss Chokecherry gone? Have I offended her?"

"Shucks no, Doc. Sairie's just, well, she gets tired of folks real quick and goes off by herself. Ain't used to folks too much, bein' raised by wolves and all."

"Ah, I'm glad thee mentioned that. I have been wondering . . ." He tapered off as Charley spun his horse and slid his rifle from the saddle holster.

"Gitcher gun," Charley hissed.

"I do not own one."

The boy shot him a puzzled look, then pointed the rifle at a dust cloud coming up fast from the direction of Coyote.

Nearing gunshot range, the dust cloud was seen to be nucleated about a single horse and a rider who yelled, "Hey, Charley!" The boy relaxed. "It's my brother."

Johnny pulled up beside them, and they fell into step towards the Doppler ranch. "Good boy, Charley. Time was you wouldn't've pulled the rifle so fast. You're learning." While Charley basked in his elder's praise, Johnny turned to Cope. "That's a nice suit of clothes y'got there, Perfesser."

"Thank you."

"Expensive like . . . I got bad news for you. I know you got here first and all, but I done sold the critter to the fat bone sharp. For $500."

"But, Johnny!"

"No words from you, kid. I been like a daddy to you, and I 'spect respect and obedience like in Ma's Bible. Five hundred bucks'll buy shoes for Dave's kids and medicine for Ma. You want your Ma to get lumbago? So don't sass me." He wheeled off, highly pleased with himself.

"I'm sorry, Doc Cope . . ."

"Do not trouble thyself, Charley. I see what is happening. Marsh has cited the authority he knows best, cold cash. Your brother hopes I will raise a better offer, and I will. In fact, I will inflate the price as high as it will go, knowing Marsh will not be able to resist outbidding me." He fell into a gloomy study, the only bright thought his plan to cost his foe—or rather, his foe's rich uncle—as much as possible. That evening

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he informed Johnny that he was prepared to offer $700. Johnny accepted, and went to bed with expectations of a healthy auction the next day.

Around midnight Cope was awakened by a nightmare. He lay abed awhile, regarding the nearly full moon through an unchinked spot between two logs, then leaned down and touched Charley, rolled up in a blanket on the floor. The lad bolted upright, and as a second thought grabbed his Smith and Wesson .45.

"Hist, it's me, Charley. Hast thou two lanterns?"

Cope saddled their horses by moonlight. Charley joined him in the stable. "I couldn't find t'other lantern. Will one do?"

The other lantern was sitting on a fossilized pelvis, as Red-Eye Dave Savage worked rapidly. "Yep, that dude Cope won't git nothing." He hummed, visions of a grateful Marsh's reward dancing like sugar plums over his head.

Johnny Doppler heard Cope and Charley ride out; he woke rifle in hand. The facts that the dogs weren't barking and the hoofbeats were receding calmed him, but he was unable to return to sleep. "Might as well go into town now and tell the fat guy about Cope's bid." He reached for his boots.

Marsh removed his reading glasses and put down the journal. He had been plowing through an involved discussion of seal anatomy; his contempt for knowledge that did not apply directly to his needs rendered the article uninteresting. The piano player downstairs in the saloon was still pounding away. Shooting seemed too lenient a fate for the musician. Thinking of such bold, vigorous, and decisive action stimulated Marsh's mind to make an unaccustomed imaginative leap.

He chuckled, then rose and dressed.

Red-Eye reached into his pocket for a match, and found a hole instead. He muttered some uncomplimentary phrases about his wife, and then sighed. Swinging into Lightning's saddle, he headed up along the creek towards the doctor's cabin. Doc Watson hated to be awakened for anything less than a blessed event or a slow death, but this was also an emergency of sorts . . .

Red-Eye was nearing the homeopath's cabin when a silent figure stepped into his path. Lightning snorted and stopped.

"Need Doc?" the shadow asked with Chokecherry Sairie's voice.

"Naw, everybody's fine and dandy, Sairie. Yuh gotta match?"

Sairie handed him a box and faded back into the brush. Red-Eye turned

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Lightning about and set off humming a song from his service days. After all, it had been in those halcyon days of war that he had first learned about explosives.

Finding Marsh's hotel room empty, Johnny Doppler stalked back downstairs and started toward the piano player. The musician had survived thus far by developing preternatural instincts; as the man in black took his first step, the pianist leapt up and behind the upright piano.

"It's me," Johnny said reassuringly.

The piano player peeked over the top, decided it was safe, and came back around. He was a gangling twelve-year-old with a creditable mustache, and bloodshot eyes exactly like those of his father, Red-Eye Dave Savage. "Howdy Cousin Johnny sir."

"You seen the fat greenie? He off with a gal?"

"Took his horse. North. 'Bout five songs ago."

Johnny nodded, and gave his cousin's son a bared-tooth grimace. The boy felt proud. He'd never seen Johnny smile before.

Charley held the lantern and the halter while Cope measured Joe. He wrote the figure beside his sketch of the beast.

Charley yawned. "Can't we do this tomorrow?"

Cope shook his head. "I told thee, Charley, that Marsh can outbid me, and will never let me, or any other scientist, near Joe again. But we shall laugh last. While Marsh is still transporting Joe to New Haven, I will be reading my report to the Academy, and my article will be in press."

"Will you send me a copy?"

"Send—Charley, I shall enroll thee as a subscriber to the *Naturalist.* I shall give thee two subscriptions if thee will only hold the lantern steady—what?"

Charley had snapped the lid down to shut off the light. "Horse. Shh." He motioned the scientist to duck behind an immense shoulder blade. Released, Joe wandered towards his pile of hay.

A bulky silhouette paused on the valley's rim, turning slowly as it surveyed the location.

"See the belly?" Cope whispered. "It's Marsh."

Standing on the rim, Marsh observed the salient features of the approach into the valley, and calculated that a determined group of well-paid men could rush in and whisk away the lizard. "A guerilla raid," he muttered. He would be able to keep the prize from Cope after all.

"He's here to gloat over his acquisition," Cope whispered to Charley.

Marsh had just realized that the lizard might be too young to walk all the way to the railroad in Zak City. They would have to build a large

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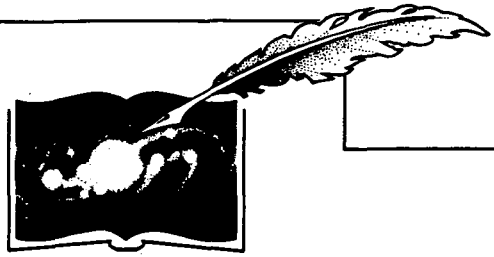

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wagon to carry it. A wagon could not be brought into the valley itself without a crew to dig a road, and there was no time for that. Thus, the lizard would have to be herded up to the road. Marsh began to pace off the distance down to the bone hut, shining gray in the moonlight.

Cope sprung up before his unaware foe. "Admiring the moon?" he asked bitterly.

Marsh snarled. "Couldn't wait to examine the beast at leisure? Hasty work and hasty bad judgment are your hallmarks, Cope."

The slim man shook his fist. "My feelings towards you were not hastily developed. They were nurtured slowly by your treacheries."

"By Gad, I've had enough of you," Marsh said. "You're a vile rascal and a faulty reasoner and a . . ."

Cope planted a right in the other's eye, then stared at his hand in amazement. Marsh staggered back, and began to reach for his navy revolvers. "I've borne enough from you," he hissed.

A steel finger graced his back. Charley Doppler reached around with his left hand and took the revolvers and knife. Then he holstered his own pistol and stepped back.

Bellowing with frustration, Marsh charged his rival. At last he had the chance to put to use *The Prairie Traveller's* hints on hand to hand combat. Soon the scientists were rolling in the dust, like small boys scuffling in a schoolyard. Charley stood, astounded, on the sidelines.

Joe had been happily munching away during the conversation. As the fight began he stiffened, turned tail, and loped into the comforting shelter of the hut.

Johnny Doppler met Sairie as he dismounted beside Marsh's horse. The pale man wore his most cheerful grimace; he was pleased that his mark was unable to stay away from the merchandise. It boded well for the bidding. "Good evening, or whatever, Sairie."

"Huh." She felt strangely worried as she rode Shaggy Joe beside the walking gunslinger, the pony giving her only a slight advantage in height. Her worries centered on the matches she'd given Red-Eye, and went beyond the obvious fact that, in his usual inebriated condition, Dave Savage was probably flammable.

The two paused on the path into the valley, and widened their eyes. The surface was littered with the shadowy masses of the fence and hut, and amongst those indistinct objects was a black shape that rolled about emitting grunts and curses.

Johnny drew his gun. "That you, Perfesser?"

Two voices gasped, "Yes."

Standing on a massive lumbar vertebra for a better view, Charley

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called, "Hey Johnny, it's a fracas." Natural tact kept him from adding that it was a funnier sight than Custer's military band.

Sairie bellowed a tentative, "Dave?" Far off, from the opposite rim of the valley, they heard, "Jest a minute, Sair." Red-Eye Dave, celebrating his brilliant scheme with red-eye whiskey, finally managed to light his fuse.

The valley erupted as the trail of powder ignited clump after clump of explosives lining the fence, with a final godawful boom as the hut—with Joe inside—was blasted into bits. A cloud of dust almost obscured the flying rock, topsoil, fossils, and scraps of giant lizard. Marsh's horse, reins looped around a small bush, took off towards the Black Hills with bush in tow.

Marsh and Cope, already on the ground, covered their heads against the dust and debris. Charley was less lucky; he'd been standing on a mined fencepost. Sairie jumped from her pinto and ran to the boy, sprawled beside the creek bed.

Red-Eye stumbled across the valley, waving a bottle and shouting, "Wahoo! Hey, Johnny, jest like old times!"

"What the hell were you doing?"

Red-Eye stopped beside his cousin, eager as a hound dog showing his master a ripe carcass. "The fat guy said he'd give anything to keep t'other dude from getting Charley's critter. So I blew the critter up. Smart, huh?"

"You drunken son of a bitch, I was just making 'em worry so's to get more money. Now you've done it." He scowled and took aim into the valley. "Well, I'll just have to settle for the money they got on 'em."

It was a long shot in poor light. The bullet scudded into the dirt inches to the left of Marsh.

The scientists, who had dazedly picked themselves up and had been taking stock of personal damages, hit the dirt.

"Don't take no offense; it's business," Red-Eye called. He sat down and reassured himself with a swig of the Indian Princess' restorative elixir.

Sairie shouted, "Magic Tooth! Head down!" Cope obliged by almost inhaling the topsoil.

"Get me out of this," Marsh screamed. "I'll pay! Don't shoot!"

"Over here, idiot," Cope hissed, and began squirming for cover. The nation's foremost reptile expert, he did a fair snake imitation. Marsh was less adept, but an eager learner.

Behind the minimal shelter afforded by a fossilized scapula, Cope whispered, "Only one of them is shooting. If we wait until right after a shot, then both run in opposite directions, one of us may escape." Marsh nodded agreement.

Meanwhile, the explosion had roused Doc Watson. He arrived in night gown and boots, and carrying shotgun and medical kit. "Over here, Doc,"

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Sairie called. The man examined Charley. "Concussion, a few broken bones—Doppler, are you through taking pot shots yet?"

Johnny squeezed off another. "Not quite, Doc. They ain't dead yet."

"Look to your brother. He's not doing too good."

Johnny said loudly, "Don't you fellers go anywhere," and prodded Red-Eye Dave into a position of watchfulness. Sairie snuck towards where Cope and Charley's horses were grazing—it would take more than an explosion to keep a Doppler Gang horse from eating—and whistled. Her pinto pony trotted to her.

The homeopath was telling Johnny to ride home and fetch a wagon. "Soon as I'm finished," Johnny promised. "He's gonna be all right, ain't he?" He gazed at his younger brother. "Ma'll have a fit," he mumbled, and his pale face grew even paler.

Cope observed Red-Eye wobbling with the breeze. "It's now or never. Run," he urged Marsh, who gave him a twenty second start, either from slow reactions or to give Cope more opportunity to shine as a solitary target. Sairie nudged Shaggy Joe into a gallop, leading the other horses. She dropped one off by the running Marsh and the other by the running Cope. In seconds all three were galloping east, revolver slugs flying ineffectually in their wake.

It was a silent, hard ride to Zak City, but Sairie got them there a little before sundown, just as a train was pulling into the station.

Sairie took the reins of the beat horses and began walking them in a slow circle. "Train to Denver. Go now." Marsh thrust a random handful of coins and bills into her hand—counting later revealed it as less than $50—and ran for the train.

"I cannot thank thee enough, Miss Chokecherry," Cope said. "I will pray for Charley's recovery; tell him I will get him the job as fossil collector if he still wishes. If thee is ever in Philadelphia, please visit me." Chokecherry Sairie was not exactly the ideal person to introduce to one's wife and daughter, but Red Cloud and Buffalo Bill had made headlines visiting Marsh's New Haven home.

Sairie stared at the scientist, dusty, bloody, tattered. She shrugged, dropped the reins, grabbed Cope and kissed him. Then she picked the reins back up. The man began backing towards the train.

"Uh . . . I only wish we had been able to have *Josaurus* with us. I lost, Miss Chokecherry, but at least Marsh lost as well."

Sairie shook her head. "When Dave blew up Joe you lost, Big Bone Chief lost, science, all lost." Cope blushed, started as if to tip his hat, realized it was long gone, and hurried aboard the train.

Sairie walked the horses south of the tracks and found Jessie Crooked-Knife. The sounds of the *Essence of Frankincense* medicine show covered the whistle as the train left for Denver. ●

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LIVING WITH NUCLEAR WEAPONS

(after the Harvard symposium)

The wise men have spoken
Of the descent of sunfire to the Earth
You will be informed of details, no doubt
  at the appropriate time

Yes, heard on the radio as an infinite hissing
& shown on TV, preempting all that
  colorful shower
  of commodities

There may be subtle changes
  leading up to the event
An announcer talking backwards
Inexplicable lapses into black & white
(back to the way things looked
In 1945—site of the first first strike)

For the first time
  the admission is made
That standing in back
Of every object you own
Is the vast machine that made it

Reduced to essentials, you wait
Alone in a room . . . windowless of course
The furniture gone or covered up
  in white sheets

Outside—within a radius of ten miles
Are half a million others, like you
Undergoing the same experiment

All the clocks
  incline their heads toward you
& all the cars are stopped on the highway

This, then, is the tabula rasa
  on which your life is written
The ground zero
  of everything that is the case

—Andrew Joron

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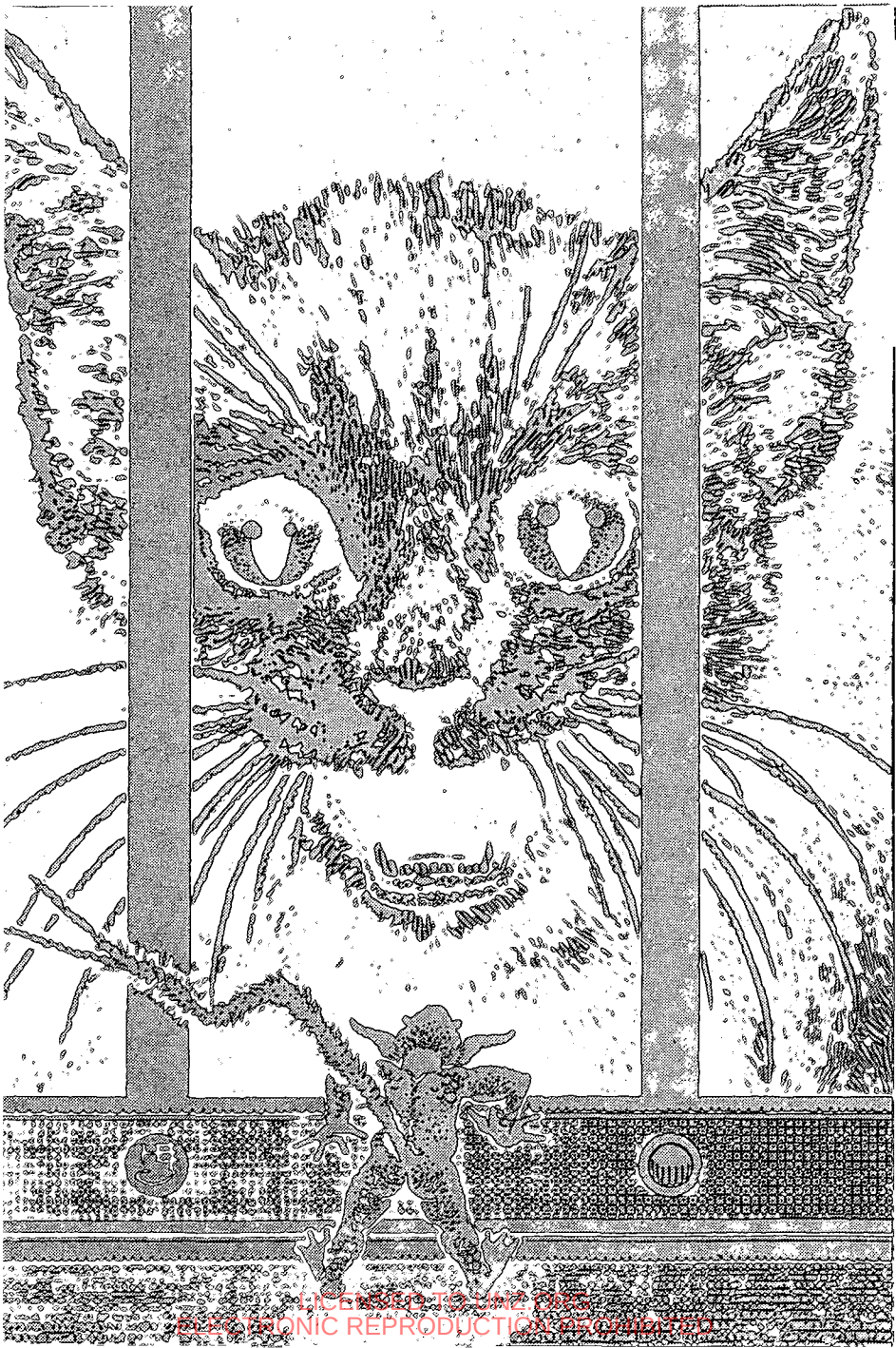

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I LOVE LITTLE PUSSY

by Isaac Asimov

A gentle children's poem was the inspiration for this tale of an aging spinster's love for her kitten, and George's (as usual) misdirected attempt to strengthen the ties that bind.

art: Hank Jankus

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George and I were sitting on a park bench on a perfect late spring day when a rather ordinary tabby cat wandered into our vicinity. I knew there were feral cats in the park that would be dangerous to approach, but this specimen had the inquisitive look of a tame pussy. Since I am proud of the fact that cats are attracted to me, I held out my hand and sure enough she sniffed at it and allowed me to stroke her head.

I was rather surprised to hear George mutter, "Wretched little beast."

"Don't you like cats, George?" I asked.

"Would you expect me to, in the light of my sad history?" he said, sighing heavily.

"I know your history is sad," I said. "Inevitably so, considering your character, but I didn't know that cats had a role in it."

"That," said George, "is because I never told you of my second cousin, Andromache."

"Andromache?"

Her father [said George] was a classical scholar, hence the name. He also had a little money, which he left to Cousin Andromache on the occasion of his early death and she, by shrewd investment, considerably increased it.

He did not include me in his bounty. I was a child of five at the time of his death and he could scarcely have left me anything outright, but a more generous soul would have set up a trust fund.

As I grew older, however, I realized that Cousin Andromache, who was twenty-two years older than I, might well predecease me. It did occur to me—for I was a precocious lad, thoughtful and far-sighted—that, in that case, I might receive a sizable share of the loot.

—Yes, provided, as you say, that I sucked up to her. Please do not try to anticipate my words, however, for that is not the phraseology I intended to use. What I was going to say was that I realized I might inherit a portion of her estate if I gave her the warmth and affection she so richly deserved.

As it happened, Cousin Andromache needed warmth and affection not only richly, but also desperately. When I was still in my teens and she was approaching forty, I realized that she was a dedicated spinster, untouched by human hands. Even at my tender age, I found the situation understandable. She was tall and rawboned, with a long plain face, large teeth, small eyes, limp hair, and no figure worth mentioning.

I said to her once, out of a natural curiosity to determine how unlikely an event might be and yet come to pass, "Cousin Andromache, has any fellow ever asked you to marry him?"

She turned a threatening face on me and said, "Asked me to marry *him?* Hah! I'd like to see some fellow ask me to marry *him!*"

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(I rather thought she would indeed like to see it happen, but I had early reached the years of discretion and did not put the thought into words.)

She went on. "If any man ever has the *gall* to ask me to marry *him,* I'll give *him* what for. I'll show *him* a thing or two. I'll teach *him* to approach a respectable woman with any of his lollygagging notions."

I didn't quite see what was lollygagging about a marriage proposal, or what might be in it to offend a respectable woman, but I didn't think it would be wise—or even safe—to ask.

For a few years, I kept hoping that some person perverse enough to be interested in Cousin Andromache might indeed make a suggestion or two because I wanted to see what she would do—while I remained at a safe distance, to be sure. There seemed, however, no chance of that. Not even her gathering wealth seemed to suffice to make her an object of marriageability to the male half of the population. One and all, it seemed, weighed the price that would have to be paid, and one and all turned away.

An abstract consideration of the situation showed me that it was exactly what I wanted. A Cousin Andromache without husband and without children would be less apt to dismiss a second cousin as a testamentary possibility. Furthermore, since she was an only child, the vicissitudes of life had left her with no relative closer than I was. That seemed an appropriate situation for me, since it meant I didn't have to work *too* hard at supplying affection. A little bit, now and then, to reinforce my position as the natural heir, would be quite enough.

When she passed that fortieth milestone, however, it must have seemed to her that if no human male wished to dare her wrath with a proposal of marriage, she would make use of a non-human companion, instead.

She disliked dogs, because she had the notion that, one and all, they lusted to bite her. I would have liked to reassure her that no dog, however gaunt, would find her a toothsome morsel, but I had the feeling this would not reassure her, and would cripple me, so I kept silent on the matter.

She also thought that horses were too large for comfort, and hamsters too small, so she finally persuaded herself that what she wanted was a cat.

Thereupon, she obtained a little grey female kitten of nondescript appearance and bestowed every bit of her ungainly affection upon it.

With an appalling lack of even a modicum of wit, she named the kitten "Pussy" and that name was retained by the cat forever after, despite changes in sizes and temperament.

What's more, she took to cuddling the kitten and saying, in a revoltingly hoarse sing-song:

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"I love little pussy, her coat is so warm
And if I don't tease her, she'll do me no harm.
I'll pet her and stroke her, and give her some food,
And pussy will love me because I'm so good."

It was simply nauseating.

I won't conceal from you, old man, that I was quite perturbed at first. Thoughts danced through my mind of besotted old maids who left all their money to their pampered, uncaring pets.

It did occur to me, as to whom would it not, that the kitten could easily be kidnapped and drowned, or taken to the zoo and fed to the lions, but then Cousin Andromache would merely get another.

Besides, she might suspect me of a hand in the felicide. Considering the paranoia peculiar to spinsters, I knew that it was perfectly possible for her to get into her head that I was primarily after her money and that she could interpret many things in that light and come fearsomely near the truth. In fact, I strongly suspected that she had already gotten it into her head.

It occurred to me, therefore, to invert matters. Why not display a passionate love of the kitten? I took to playing moronic games with it, dangling a piece of string for it to fight with, stroking it (sometimes, a little longingly, in the region of its neck), and feeding it tidbits—sometimes even (when Cousin Andromache was watching) from my own plate.

I must say it worked. Cousin Andromache softened distinctly. I presume she reasoned that I couldn't possibly be after Pussy's money, for she had none, so she chalked it up to the pure and unalloyed love I had for all of God's creatures. I helped strengthen that notion by telling her, in fervent tones, of how pure my love for them was. It made her accept my love for her with fewer fears concerning any ulterior motives I happened to have.

However, the trouble with a kitten's that eventually it becomes a cat—oh, did Ogden Nash say that also? Well, my best bits are constantly being stolen. I'm quite resigned to it.

I don't know, old man, if you have ever owned a cat, but with age, they grow larger, more self-centered, more self-assured, more contemptuous of their owners, more inert, more utterly uninterested in anything but food and sleep. The last thing on their contemptible little minds is the comfort and peace of mind of the person who feeds them.

In addition, Pussy grew rather ill-tempered. It had always seemed to me that tabby cats are comparatively placid and that it is the tomcats who are aggressive. It was clear, however, that Pussy had the disposition of a tomcat, despite her sex, and an unaltered tomcat at that. What's more, she seemed quite intolerant of me and would deliberately go out

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THE AWESOME POWER TO SAVE THE GALAXY—
OR DESTROY IT

FUSION FIRE

KATHY TYERS

While her royal family seeks to seal her doom, Lady Firebird faces her greatest challenge in the form of two implacable enemies: one from outside her loyal band of fighters—and one from within!

BANTAM

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of her path in order to pass near me and scratch me surreptitiously. I tell you, old man, I could almost believe the beast could read my mind.

Considering Pussy's disposition, it is not at all surprising that Cousin Andromache went into a small decline. I found her in tears one day, or as close to tears as her tough and scraggy temperament would allow her to be.

"Oh, Cousin George," she said to me, "Pussy doesn't love me."

Pussy was, at the time, sprawled in comfort five feet away and was looking at Cousin Andromache with haughty distaste—its usual expression except when it looked at me, at which time the expression became one of settled hate.

I called the creature to my side, whereupon it favored me with a sneer and a bit of a snarl and stayed where it was. I strode to her and picked her up. She weighed fourteen pounds of solid inertia and the task was not an easy one, particularly since she kept adjusting her right forepaw (the most dangerous one) into a position where a rapid swipe could be made.

I clutched both her forepaws to prevent that, whereupon she hung in such a way as to double the pull of gravity upon her. I believe that only cats and truly obnoxious human infants know the secret and I am constantly surprised that scientists do not investigate the phenomenon.

I placed her in Cousin Andromache's lap, pointed at the tableau and said, "See, Cousin Andromache, Pussy loves you."

But I had taken my mind off the malignant devil, so that she had the chance of biting my pointing finger, and promptly did so to the bone. She then got off Cousin Andromache's lap and walked away.

Cousin Andromache wailed, "You see, she doesn't love me!" Characteristically, she said nothing about my massacred finger.

I sucked bitterly at the damage and said, "That's the way cats are. Why not give Pussy to someone you hate and get a new kitten?"

"Oh no," said Cousin Andromache, turning on me one of her censorious looks. "I love little Pussy. Isn't there some way of training a cat to display affection?"

I longed to make some clever comment to the effect that it would be easier to train Cousin Andromache to be pretty, and was able to suppress the longing only because a brilliant idea had illuminated the interior of my skull.

I had recently formed my friendship with Azazel, whom I may have mentioned to you—oh, I did? Well, all right. You needn't add "ad nauseam" merely to display your knowledge of Latin.

In any case, why shouldn't I use Azazel's abilities in this respect? What was the use of having a two-centimeter extraterrestrial being of advanced technological abilities on call, so to speak, if one didn't make use of it?

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I said, "Cousin Andromache, I believe I could train Pussy to show you affection."

"You?" she said, nastily. It was a word, and an intonation, she had used on me before, and I often thought how effectively I would resent it if I were only in a position to do so safely.

But the idea was looking better and better to me as I pictured Cousin Andromache's gratitude to me if I could pull it off.

"Cousin Andromache," I said earnestly, "let me have Pussy for one day—*one day*. I will then bring back a loving Pussy who will ask for nothing better than to sit in your lap and purr in your ear."

Cousin Andromache hesitated. "Are you sure you will be kind to her while you have her. You know, Pussy is a very sensitive creature, shy and gentle."

Yes, indeed, about as shy and gentle as a particularly irritated grizzly bear.

"I would take very good care of her, Cousin Andromache," I murmured insinuatingly.

And, in the end, Cousin Andromache's longing for an affectionate pussy overcame her uncertainties and she gave her permission with many an injunction to keep the little thing from being harmed by the cruel outside world.

Of course, I had to buy a cage first, one with bars as thick as my thumb. This I felt might retain Pussy, if she didn't get too angry, and off we went together.

Azazel didn't get as angry in those days as he does now when I call him up. He was curious about Earth in those days.

On this occasion, though, what he was was terrified. He screamed all but ultrasonically. It pierced my eardrums like an icepick.

"What's the matter?" I said, my hands over the affected organs.

"That creature." Azazel's tail pointed to Pussy. "What is it?"

I turned to look at Pussy. It had flattened itself at the bottom of the cage. Its wicked green eyes stared at Azazel with fixed longing. Its tail twitched slowly and then it launched itself at the bars of the cage, which shook and rattled. Azazel screamed again.

"It's just a cat," I said, soothingly. "A little kitten."

"Put me in your pocket," shrieked Azazel. "Put me in your pocket."

On the whole, that seemed a good idea. I plunked him into my shirt-pocket where he trembled like a tuning fork and Pussy, angered and puzzled at his disappearance, spat her displeasure.

Finally, I could make out coherent words from within my pocket.

"Oh, my supple tail," moaned Azazel. "It is just like a drakopathan—just like. They're ferocious beasts that bite and claw and tear, but this cat

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thing is much bigger and more ferocious by the look of it. Why have you exposed me to this, O Excrescence of a Rubbishy Planet?"

"O Fearless Master of the Universe," I said, "it is precisely in connection with this animal, whose name is Pussy, that I need a demonstration of your matchless might."

"No, no," came his muffled cry.

"It is to make a better cat. I want Pussy to love my Cousin Andromache who owns the animal. I want Pussy to give my cousin affection and tenderness and sweetness—"

Azazel poked a frightened eye over the top of the pocket and stared at Pussy for a moment. He said, "That creature has no love in it for anything but itself. That is quite obvious from its C-aura."

"Exactly! You must add love for Cousin Andromache."

"What do you mean, add love? Have you never heard of the Law of Conservation of Emotion, you sub-technological dolt? You can't add love. You can only transfer it from one object within a creature's emotional nexus to another."

"Do so," I said. "Take from the superfluity of love Pussy devotes to herself and fashion a strong attachment to Cousin Andromache."

"Taking from the self-love of that super-drakopathan is a task too formidable. I have seen my people strain their intensifiers permanently at lesser tasks."

"Then take the love from elsewhere in Pussy, O Superlative One. Do you wish word to get out that you failed a challenge so small?"

Vanity was, of course, Azazel's besetting fault, and I could see the possibility I had mentioned was gnawing at him.

He said, "Well, I will try. Do you have a likeness of your cousin? A good likeness?"

I certainly had, though I doubt that any photograph of Cousin Andromache could be both a likeness and good at the same time. Putting that philosophical matter to one side, I had a large cabinet photograph of her that I always placed in a prominent position when she came on a visit. I did have to take the fig tree out of the living room on those occasions, though, for the photo had a tendency to wither its leaves.

Azazel looked at the picture dubiously, and sighed. "Very well," he said, "but remember that this is not magic, but science. I can only work within the limits of the Law of Conservation of Emotion."

But what did I care for Azazel's limits of action as long as he did his job?

The next day I brought Pussy back to Cousin Andromache. Pussy had always been a strong and malevolent cat, but her indifference to others had induced a customary apathy that had kept her evil nature within

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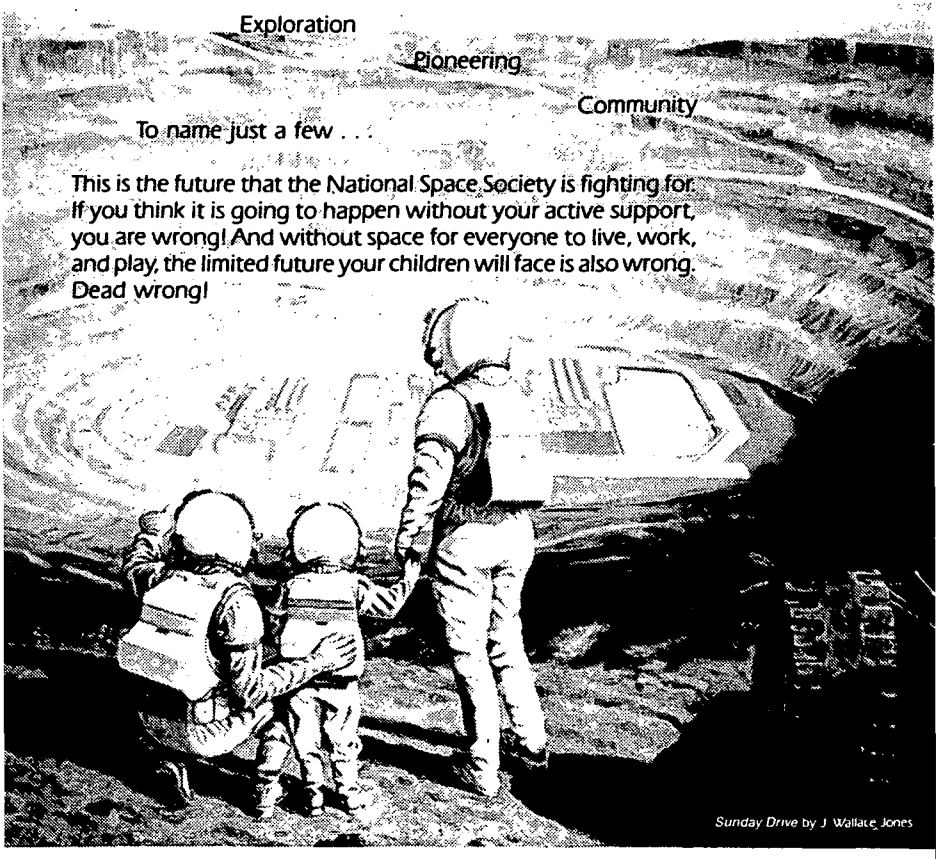

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bounds. Now, apparently, with her sudden wild love for Cousin Andromache frustrated by the absence of her object of affection, she had turned into a demon. She made it quite plain that, were it not for the bars of her cage, which gave dangerously under her pressure, she would tear me into shreds, and I was sure she could do it.

Pussy's mood changed completely, however, when she spied her mistress. The spitting, snarling, slashing devil became at once a panting, purring, picture of delight. She turned on her back, exposing a massively sinewy belly that she clearly wanted scratched.

Cousin Andromache, with a cry of delight, placed a finger through the bars to oblige. I then opened the gate and Pussy went sailing out into Cousin Andromache's waiting arms, purring as loudly as a truck going over a cobbled road, and striving to strop its rasping tongue on my cousin's leathery cheek. I will draw the curtain over what followed, because it will not bear description. Suffice it to say that, among other things, Cousin Andromache said to the vile cat, "And did you miss your loving Andromache-Womickey?"

It was enough to make me vomicky, let me tell you.

Stolidly, however, I remained, for I was waiting to hear what I wanted to hear and, finally, Cousin Andromache looked up with a pallid glitter in her opaque little eyes and said, "Thank you, Cousin George. I apologize for doubting you, and I promise you I won't forget this to my dying day and will then make you a suitable return."

"It was my pleasure, Cousin Andromache," I said, "and I hope your dying day is far, far in the future."

What was more, if she had at that moment consented to settle a goodly sum on me effective immediately, I believe I would actually have meant what I said—within limits.

I stayed away from Cousin Andromache for a while, not wishing to push my luck, since my presence in her vicinity had, in the past, always seemed to sour her—I don't know why.

I did phone her every now and then, though, just to make sure all was well, and, to my continuing delight, all *was* well. At least, she would each time trill coyly into my ear, "I love little Pussy," and then cite nauseating details of the cat's affectionate behavior.

Then, about three months after I had brought back Pussy, Cousin Andromache called and asked me to drop in for lunch. Naturally, under the circumstances, Cousin Andromache's wish was my law, so I hurried over at the set time. Since she had sounded cheerful on the phone, I had no apprehensions.

Nor did I have any when I entered her apartment, even though I nearly slipped to destruction on the throw-rug she kept on her polished floor

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near the entrance for what I could only assume were homicidal reasons. She greeted me with what was intended, I imagine, as a jolly grin.

"Come in, Cousin George," she said. "Say hello to little Pussy."

I looked down at little Pussy and shied in horror. Little Pussy, perhaps because it was so full of love, had grown still farther, and at a rapid pace. She seemed nearly three feet along exclusive of lashing tail and I judged her to weigh, conservatively, twenty-five pounds of whipcord and gristle. Her eyes were flat, her mouth was open in a silent snarl, her eye-teeth gleamed like burnished needles, and her eyes, as they glared at me, were filled with indescribable loathing. She stood between Cousin Andromache and me quite as though guarding the silly woman against any false move on my part.

I dared make no move at all, for who knew what that monstrous creature might consider false.

I tried to be strong, but there was a distinct quaver in my voice as I said, "Is Pussy safe, Cousin Andromache?"

"Perfectly safe," said Cousin Andromache, giggling rather in the same fashion a rusty hinge would, "for she knows you are a relative and mean me well."

"Good," I said hollowly, wondering if it were possible for Pussy to read my mind. I decided she couldn't or I would not at that moment have been alive, I'm sure.

Cousin Andromache seated herself on the couch and motioned me to take the armchair. However, I waited till Pussy had also jumped on the couch and had placed her head in Cousin Andromache's lap in luxurious abandon, before daring to move sufficiently to sit down myself.

"Of course," said Cousin Andromache, "my sweet little Pussy is just a little unreasonable when she thinks someone is trying to harm me. A couple of weeks ago, the newsboy threw the paper just as I was coming out the door. It hit me on the shoulder. It didn't really hurt, but Pussy was after him like a flash. If he hadn't peddled his bicycle at top speed, I really don't know what would have happened to him. Now the boy won't return and I have to go out every morning and buy the paper at a newsstand. It is comfortable to know, though, that I'm protected from any mugger or burglar."

At the words, "mugger or burglar," Little Pussy seemed to be reminded of me, for she turned to look at me and her eyes blazed with the fires of Hell.

It seemed to me I saw what had happened. After all, hate is negative love.

Pussy had had a mild hatred for everything and everyone but herself and, just possibly, Cousin Andromache. To increase Pussy's love for Andromache, Azazel, following the dictates of the Law of Conservation of

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Emotion, had to withdraw love from all other objects. Since that love was already negative, it grew more negative than ever. And since Azazel had added love with no sparing hand, the other loves grew *much* more negative. In short, Pussy now hated everyone and everything with an extravagant hatred that had strengthened and enlarged her muscles, sharpened her teeth and claws, and turned her into a killing machine.

Cousin Andromache chattered on. "Last week," she said, "Pussy and I were out for a morning stroll and we met Mr. Walsingham with his Doberman pinscher. I had every intention of avoiding him and crossing the street, but the dog had seen Pussy and snarled at the little innocent creature. Pussy didn't seem to mind, but it frightened me—I don't like dogs at *all*—and I'm afraid I let out a small shriek. That activated dear little Pussy's protective instinct, and she fell on the dog at once. There was no hope of separating them, and the dog, I understand, is still at the vet's. Mr. Walsingham is trying to have Pussy declared a dangerous animal, but of course it was the dog that took the initiative and Pussy was merely acting in my defense."

She hugged Pussy as she said that, placing her face in actual contact with the cat's canines, and with no perceptible nervousness. And then she got to the real reason for the invitation to lunch.

She simpered horribly and said, "But I called you here to give you some news I felt I should tell you personally and not on the telephone—I have a gentleman caller."

"A what!" I jumped slightly, and Pussy at once rose and arched its back. I quickly froze.

I have since thought it out. It seems clear that the sensation of being loved—even if only by a cat out of Golgotha—had softened Cousin Andromache's sinewy heart and made her ready to gaze with eyes of affection on some poor victim. And who knows? Perhaps the consciousness of being loved had changed her inner being to the point of making her seem marginally toothsome to someone particularly dim of vision and particularly lacking in taste.

But that was a later analysis. At the time Cousin Andromache broke the news, my keen mind quickly grasped the vital point—my prosperous relative might possibly have someone else to whom to leave her cash and possessions.

My first impulse was to rise from the seat, seize Cousin Andromache, and shake some sense of family responsibility into her. My second impulse, following a millisecond later, was not to move a muscle. Pussy's hate-filled eye was on me.

"But, Cousin Andromache," I said, "you always told me that if any fellow came lollygagging around you, you'd show *him!* Why not let Pussy show him? That will fix him."

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"Oh, no, Hendrik is *such* a nice man and he loves cats, too. He stroked Pussy, and Pussy *let* him. That's when I knew he was all right. Pussy is a good judge of character."

I suppose even Pussy would have trouble matching the look of hatred I let *her* have.

"In any case," said Cousin Andromache, "Hendrik is coming over tonight and I believe he will propose that we formalize conditions by getting married. I wanted you to know."

I tried to say something, but couldn't. I tell you I felt as though I had been thoroughly emptied of my internal organs and I was nothing but hollow skin.

She went on, "I want you also to know, Cousin George, that Hendrik is a retired gentleman, who is quite well off. It is understood between us that, if I predecease him, none of my small savings will go to him. They will go to you, dear Cousin George, as the person who turned Pussy into a loving and efficient companion and protector for me."

Someone had turned the sun and the daylight back on again and all my internal organs were in place once more. It occurred to me, in the merest trice, that if Hendrik predeceased Cousin Andromache, his estate would be very likely added to hers, and would also eventually come to me.

I said ringingly, "Cousin Andromache. Your money does not concern me. Only your love and your future happiness do. Marry Hendrik, be happy, and live forever. That's all I ask."

I said it with such sincerity, old fellow, that I came within this much of convincing myself I meant it.

And then, that evening—

I wasn't there, of course, but I found out about it later. Hendrik—seventy, if he was a day, a little over five feet tall and pushing a hundred and eighty pounds in weight—came to call.

She opened the door for him, and skipped skittishly away. He threw his arms wide, called out, "My love!" advanced heavily, slipped on the throw-rug, went hurtling forward into Cousin Andromache feet-first, and bowled her over.

That was all Pussy needed. She knew an attack on her mistress when she saw one. By the time the screaming Andromache pulled the screaming Pussy off screaming Hendrik, it was too late for any hope of a romantic marriage proposal that night. It was indeed very nearly too late for anything at all that would involve Hendrik.

Two days later, I visited him at the hospital at Cousin Andromache's hysterical request. He was still bandaged to the eyebrows and a team of doctors were discussing the various possible strategies of skin-grafting.

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I introduced myself to Hendrik, who wept copiously, drenching his bandages, and begged me to tell my fair relative that this was a visitation upon him for being unfaithful to his first wife, Emmeline, dead these seventeen years, and for even dreaming of marrying anyone at all.

"Tell your cousin," he said, "we will always be the dearest of friends, but I dare not ever see her again, for I am but flesh and blood and the sight of her might arouse loving thoughts and I would then once more be attacked by a grizzly bear."

I carried the sad news to Cousin Andromache, who took to her bed at once, crying out that through her doing, the best of men had been permanently maimed—which was undoubtedly true.

The rest, old man, is unalloyed tragedy. I would have sworn that Cousin Andromache was incapable of dying of a broken heart, but a team of specialists maintained that that was exactly what she proceeded to do. That was sad, I suppose, but the unalloyed tragedy I refer to was that she had had time to alter her will.

In the new will, she expressed her great affection for me and her certainty that I was far too noble to concern myself over a few pennies so that she left her entire estate of $300,000, not to me, but to her lost love, Hendrik, hoping it would make up to him for the suffering and the medical bills he had incurred because of her.

All this was expressed in terms so affecting that the lawyer who read the will to me wept uncontrollably and so, as you can well imagine, did I.

However, I was not entirely forgotten. Cousin Andromache stated in her will that she left me something she knew I would value far more than the paltry dross of cash. In short, she had left me Pussy.

George just sat there, staring numbly at nothingness, and I couldn't help saying, "Do you still have Pussy?"

He started, focused on me with an effort, and said, "No, not exactly. The very day I received her, she was trampled by a horse."

"By a horse!"

"Yes. The horse died of its wounds the next day. A shame, for it was an innocent horse. It's fortunate, on the whole, that no one had seen me open Pussy's cage and shake her into the horse's stall."

His eyes glazed over again, and his lips mouthed, silently: Three—hundred—thousand—dollars!

Then he turned to me and said, "So can you lend me a tenner?"

What could I do?●

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THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

The rainbow trout arcing
in the bright mind's-eye sun,
Ten pounds of displaced water sparkling
in shards more dazzling than these
As it twists back into the depths
of my swift dreams,

Would be to you as molecules
to miracles,
Who deftly slipped the radar nets
of scientists—golfers, ruggers—
To surface as I knew you would,

Curiously nosing toward the shine
of my lone Sunfish
On a heathered day when Scottish mist
had driven off American newsmen,

Flopping for only a moment
in my trap,
Then plying me with dignity
and innocence from your cunning eye—

For I too am an angler, who knows
the career value of a good catch
And has one gleaming eye on the
Smithsonian,

And yet, O ancient cousin of my dream fish,

I threw you back.

—Terry McGarry

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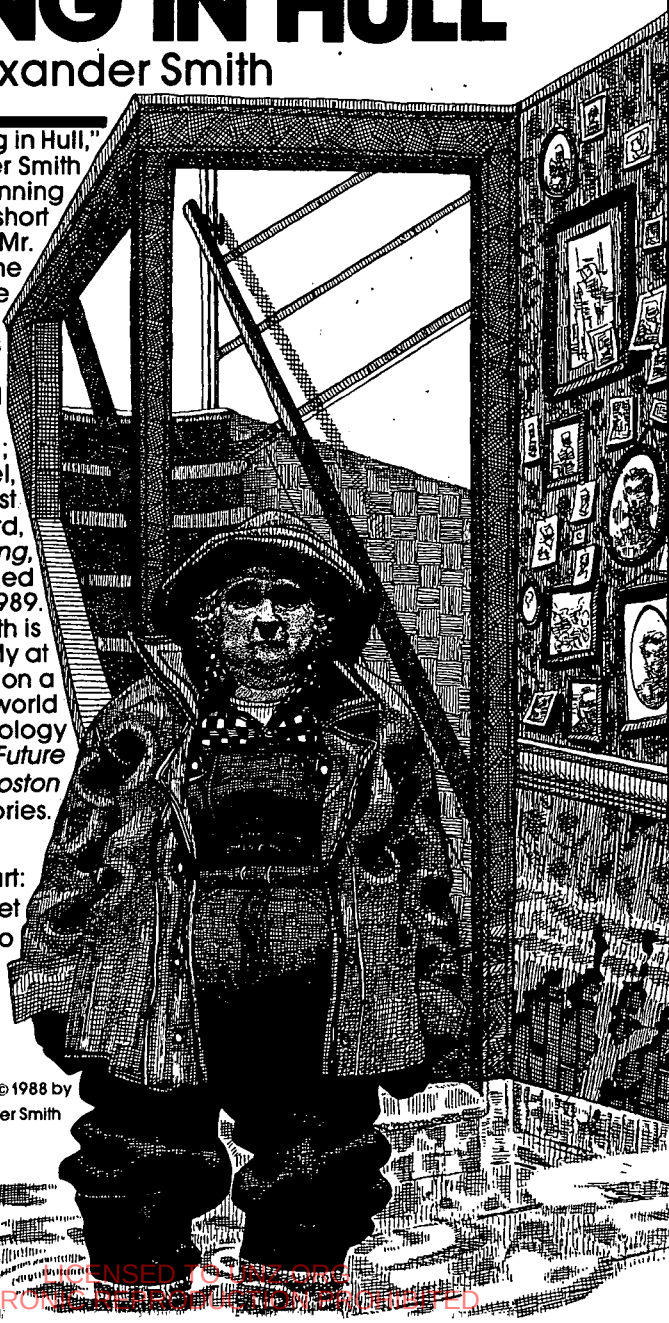
DYING IN HULL

by D. Alexander Smith

With "Dying in Hull," D. Alexander Smith makes a stunning debut as a short story writer. Mr. Smith is the author of three novels. His first, *Marathon*, was published by Ace in 1982 and is scheduled for reprinting; his second novel, *Rendezvous*, is just out; and the third, *Homecoming*, will be published in June of 1989. Mr. Smith is currently at work on a shared world anthology of *Future Boston* stories.

art: Janet Aulisio



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In the wee hours of February 12, 2004, Ethel Goodwin Cobb clumped down the oak staircase to check the water level in her dining room. She always checked her floor when the sea was lowest, no matter whether ebb tide came during the day or, as this time, in the dark of night.

Moonlight from the window reflected on the empty hardwood floor, a pale milky rhombus. A thin glistening sheen of still water lay over the wood, bright and smooth like mirror glass.

Blinking sleepily, Ethel sat her chunky body on the next-to-bottom step and leaned forward to press her big square thumb down into the rectangular puddle. She felt the moisture and withdrew her now-wet hand. Water slid in to cover the briefly-bare spot, and in seconds, the surface was motionless and perfect, her mark gone.

She yawned and shook herself like a disgruntled dog.

Gunfire in the harbor had disturbed her rest; she had slept fitfully until the alarm had gone off. Well, she was awake now. Might as well start the day.

The rose-pattern wallpaper was rippled, discolored with many horizontal lines from rising high water marks. It was crusty at eye level but sodden and peeling where it met the floorboards. Above the waterline, Ethel had filled her dining room with photographs of the town of Hull—houses, streets, beaches, the rollercoaster at Paragon Park—and the people who had lived there. Pictures of the past, left behind in empty houses by those who had fled and forgotten.

Ethel carefully touched the floor again, licking her thumb afterwards to taste the brine. "Wet," she muttered. "No doubt about it." For a moment she hung her head, shoulders sagging, then slapped her palms against the tops of her knees. "That's that." She rose slowly and marched back upstairs to dress.

Cold air drafts whiffled through the loose window frames as she quickly donned her checked shirt, denim overalls, and wool socks. The sky outside was dark gray, with just a hint of dawn. Her bedroom walls were adorned with more photographs like those downstairs. As the water rose with the passing months and years, she periodically had to rearrange things, bringing pictures up from below and finding space in the bathroom, on the stairway, or in her makeshift second-floor kitchen.

Crossing to the white wooden mantelpiece, she hefted the letter. Ethel read what she had written, scowling at her spiky penmanship, then folded the paper twice, scoring the creases with her fingernail. She sealed it in an envelope, licked the stamp and affixed it with a thump. Returning to the bed, Ethel stuck the letter in her shirt pocket and pulled on her knee-high wellingtons.

By the time she descended again to the first floor, the tide had risen

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to cover the bottom step. Ethel waded over to her front door and put on her yellow slicker and her father's oilskin sou'wester, turning up the hat's front brim.

The door stuck, expanded by the moisture. She wrenched it open and stepped out, resolving to plane it again when she returned. Closing the door behind her, she snapped its cheap padlock shut.

Queequeg floated high and dry, tethered to the porch by lines from his bow and stern. Ethel unwrapped the olive-green tarpaulin from his motor and captain's console. When she boarded her boat, the white Boston whaler rocked briefly, settling deeper into the water that filled K Street. After checking the outboard's propeller to verify that no debris had fouled its blades, Ethel pushed *Queequeg*'s motor back to vertical, untied his painters, and poled away from her house.

She turned the ignition and the big ninety-horse Evinrude roared to life, churning water and smoke. Blowing on her hands to warm them, she eased *Queequeg*'s throttle forward and burbled east down K to the ruins of Beach Avenue.

Dawn burnished the horizon, illuminating the pewter-gray scattered clouds. Submerged K Street was a silver arrow that sparkled with a thousand moving diamonds. The air was bright with cold, tangy with the scents of kelp and mussels, the normally rough winter ocean calm now that last night's nor'easter had passed.

She stood at the tiller sniffing the breeze, her stocky feet planted wide against the possibility of *Queequeg* rolling with an ocean swell, her hands relaxed on the wheel. They headed north past a line of houses on their left, Ethel's eyes darting like a general inspecting the wounded after battle.

As the town of Hull sank, its houses had fallen to the Atlantic, singly or in whole streets. These windward oceanfronts, unshielded from the open sea, were the first to go. Black asphalt shingles had been torn from their roofs and walls by many storms. Porches sagged or collapsed entirely. Broken windows and doors were covered with Cambodian territorial chop signs of the Ngor, Pran, and Kim waterkid gangs. Some homes had been burned out, the soot rising from their empty windowframes like the petals of black flowers.

A girl's rusted blue motor scooter leaned against the front stairs of 172 Beach. Barnacles grew on its handlebars. Mary Donovan and her parents had lived here, Ethel remembered, before she moved to downtown Boston and became an accountant. A good student who had earned one of Ethel's few A-pluses, Mary had ridden that scooter to high school every day, even in the snow, until the water had made riding impossible.

Beach Avenue had been vacant from end to end for years. Still, Ethel always began her day here. It was a reminder and a warning. Her tough

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brown eyes squinted grimly as the whaler chugged in the quiet, chill day.

"I could have told you folks," Ethel addressed the ghosts of the departed owners. "You don't stop the sea."

Sniffling—cold air made her nose run—she turned down P Street. For three hundred years her ancestors had skippered their small open boats into Hull's rocky coastal inlets, its soft marshy shallows, to harvest the sea. In the skeleton of a town, Ethel Cobb, the last in her family, lived on the ocean's bounty—even if it meant scavenging deserted homes.

Like 16 P just ahead. She throttled back and approached cautiously.

16 P's front door was open, all its lights out. The Cruzes have left, Ethel thought with regret. The last family on P Street. Gone.

Cautiously, she circled the building once to verify that no other combers were inside.

Decades of salt winds had silvered its cedar shingles. Foundation cracks rose like ivy vines up the sides of its cement half-basement. Sprung gutters hung loose like dangled fishing rods. She killed the steel-blue Evinrude and drifted silently toward the two-story frame house.

Luisa Cruz had been born in 16 P, Ethel remembered, in the middle of the Blizzard of '78, when Hull had been cut off from the mainland. A daydreamer, Luisa had sat in the fourth row and drawn deft caricatures of rock stars all over her essay questions.

So the Cruz family had moved, Ethel thought sadly. Another one gone. Were any left?

She looped *Queequeg*'s painter over the porch banister and splashed up 16 P's steps, towing a child's oversize sailboat behind her. The front door had rusted open and Ethel went inside.

Empty soda and beer squeezebottles floated in the foyer, and there was a vaguely disturbing smell. Ethel slogged through soggy newspapers to the kitchen. Maria Cruz had made tea in this kitchen, she recalled, while they had talked about Luisa's chances of getting into Brandeis.

An ancient refrigerator stood in a foot and a half of water. She dragged the door open with a wet creak. Nothing.

The pantry beyond yielded a box of moist taco shells and three cans of tomato paste. Ethel checked the expiration dates, nodded, and tossed them into her makeshift barrow.

What little furniture remained in the living room was rotten and mildewed. The bedroom mattress was green-furred and stank. The bureau's mahogany veneer had curled away from the expanding maple underneath. When Ethel leaned her arm on the dresser, a lion's-claw foot broke. It collapsed slowly into the sawdust-flecked water like an expiring walrus.

Out fell a discolored Polaroid snapshot: Luisa and her brother in grad-

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uation cap and gown. I was so proud of her I could have burst, Ethel remembered. Drying the photo carefully, she slipped it into her breast pocket.

On an adjacent high shelf, built into the wall above the attached headboard, were half a dozen paperback books, spines frayed and twisted, their covers scalped. Luisa had been a good reader, a child who wanted to learn so much it had radiated from her like heat.

Pleased, Ethel took them all.

In the bathroom, she found a mirror embossed with the Budweiser logo. With her elbow, Ethel cleaned the glass. The round wrinkled face that grinned back at her had fueled rumors that she had been a marine. The mirror would probably fetch a few dollars at the flea market, maybe more to a memorabilia collector.

Only the front bedroom left to comb, she thought. Good combing. Thank you, Cruz family.

A vulture, Joan Gordon had called her once. "You're just a vulture, eating decay," her friend had said, with the certainty of a mainlander.

"I'm a Cobb," Ethel had answered thickly, gripping the phone. "We live on the sea. My grandfather Daniel Goodwin was lobstering when he was nine."

"What you're doing isn't fishing. It's theft. Just like the waterkids."

"It's *not* like the kids!" Ethel had shouted.

"It's *stealing*," Joan had challenged her.

"No! Just taking what the sea gives. Housecombing is like lobstering." She had clung to her own words for reassurance.

"What you take belongs to other people," her friend had said vehemently.

"Not after they leave," Ethel shot back. "Then it's the ocean's."

Joan switched tacks. "It's dangerous to live in Hull."

"Those folks that left didn't have to go. I'm staying where my roots are."

"Your roots are *underwater*, Ethel!" Joan entreated. "Your town is disappearing."

"It is not," Ethel insisted. "Don't say that."

"Come live in our building. We have a community here."

"Bunch of old folks. Don't want to live with old folks."

"Plenty of people here younger than you."

"Living in a tower's not for me. Closed in, a prisoner. Afraid to go out. Wouldn't like it."

"How do you know? You've never visited me."

"Anyhow, I can't afford it."

She seldom spoke with Joan now. The subject had worn her feelings raw.

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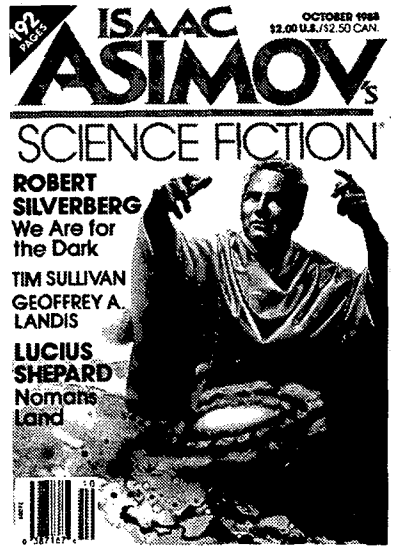
THIS YEAR ENTER ANOTHER DIMENSION.



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"Damn it, Joan," she said in 16 P's hallway, "why did you have to leave?"

The front bedroom door was ajar in a foot and a half of water. She pushed and heard it butt against something. Slowly she craned her neck around.

The two oriental corpses floated on their faces, backs arched, arms and legs hanging down into brown water swirled with red. Ethel gagged at the stench. The youths' long black hair waved like seaweed, their shoulders rocking limply. Catfish and eels nibbled on waving tendrils of human skin and guts.

Retching, Ethel grabbed one of the boys under his armpit and hauled him over onto his back. The bodies had been gutted, bullets gouged out of their chests, leaving no evidence. Periwinkle snails crawled in bloody sockets where the killers had cut out their victims' eyes and sliced off their lips. Each youth's left hand had been amputated. Ethel searched the water until she found one, a bloated white starfish with a Pran gang tattoo on its palm.

She remembered last night's gunshots in Hull Bay. You did not deserve this, she thought to the ruined face, letting it slip back into the water. No one deserved this, not even waterkids.

Of course she knew who did it. Everyone knew who executed waterkids. That was the point. The men on Hog Island *wanted* you to know. They wanted Hull to themselves. The bodies were reminders. And incentive.

In the distance she heard the chatter of several approaching engines. More Cambodian waterkids coming. Hastily she wiped vomit from her mouth and rushed out of the house.

Jumping into the whaler, she untied *Queequeg*'s painter and turned his key, shoving the throttle down hard as his engine caught. But not quickly enough. Before she could get away, four dark gray whalers surrounded her, Pran gang chop signs airbrushed beautifully onto their fiberglass gunwales.

"Hey, grandma." Their leader stood cockily in the stern of his boat while his helmsman grinned. He wore immaculate brown leather pants and a World War II flight jacket, unmarked by spray or moisture. "What's your hurry? Seen a ghost?"

Queequeg rocked slightly as the waves from their sudden arrival washed underneath him. "Yes," Ethel answered.

"Find anything valuable?"

"Nothing you'd want." Unconsciously she touched her breast pocket. "Nothing you can fence."

"Really? Let's see." His boat drifted up against hers and he leaped across into her stern, landing on sure sea legs. "You keep your stuff here?" he scornfully pointed at the plastic sailboat, mugging for his

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guffawing friends. He kicked it over with his boot and rummaged around among the floorboards. "Hey, Wayne! Huang! We got any use for taco shells?" He held them aloft.

"No, man," they answered gleefully.

"All right, grandma, guess we'll have to look elsewhere." He dropped the box and turned. As she started to relax, he wheeled. "What's in your pocket?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"In your pocket," he snapped.

"A letter and a photograph," she said steadily.

"A naked man, maybe?" the Pran leader chortled. "Let's see it." She opened her sou'wester and handed the picture to him. Waving it like a small fan, he stepped back into his own boat. "Worthless." He pointed it at her like a prod. "Pran gang combs *first*, grandma. Understand? Otherwise the next time I won't just tip over your toy boat. You understand?" He tossed the photo over his shoulder.

Ethel watched it flutter down onto the water, and nodded. "I understand."

He gestured and they started their engines, moving down P Street toward the empty house.

Ethel debated with herself. Keeping silent was too risky—they could always find her later. "Check the front bedroom," she called after them.

He stopped the engine and swung back. "What?" he asked ominously.

"Check the front bedroom. Your two missing friends are there."

The Cambodian teenager's broad face whitened. "Dead?"

She nodded mutely.

"Those bastards," he said softly.

"I'm sorry." She clapsed her hands before her.

"*Sorry*?" he shrieked in misery, the hurt child suddenly breaking through his tough façade. "What do you know about sorry?" Their boats leapt away. "What do *you* know about sorry?"

As the sounds of their engines receded, Ethel slowly let out her breath. Hands trembling, she engaged *Queequeg*'s throttle and slowly circled. Sure enough, the snapshot was suspended about three feet below the surface. Ethel lifted her gaffing net and dragged it by the spot, scooping up the picture. The water had curled it and she dried it on her thigh, then returned it to her pocket.

Glancing back at the boats now moored at 16 P, she quickly cut in the whaler's engine with a roar, carving a double white plume behind her.

For the rest of the morning Ethel and *Queequeg* combed the alphabet streets on Hull's submerged flatlands. Nearly all of these houses had long since been abandoned, and she neither stopped nor slowed. Fre-

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quently she twisted to check behind her, but there was no sign of the waterkids.

By eleven she had finished W, X, and Y, tiny alleyways that butted against Allerton Hill. Trees at its base were gray and leafless, drowned by the rising seawater. Terry Flaherty had lived on W, she remembered. A short chubby boy with big eyes and a giggle that never stopped, he was someplace in Connecticut now, selling mutual funds. Probably forgotten all the eleventh-grade American history she'd taught him.

As she passed Allerton Point, she looked across the harbor to glass-and-steel Boston. The downtown folks were talking about building walls to hold back the sea that rose as the city sank, but with no money, Hull literally could not afford to save itself. Every storm took more houses, washing out the ground underneath so they fell like sandcastles.

Ethel's house at 22 K was on the far leeward side, as safe as you could be on the flatland, but even it had suffered damage and was endangered.

Town government was disintegrating. People no longer paid property taxes, no longer voted. Nobody ran for selectman, nobody cared. For protection, folks relied on themselves or bought it from Hog Island or the Cambodian waterkids. At night, the long black peterborough boats moved sleekly in the harbor, navigating by infrared. Ethel stayed inside then.

Most of Hull High School was submerged, the brick portico columns standing like piers in the shallow water. The football field was a mudflat.

Forty-one years of history students, all gone, all memories.

When she was young, her students had sniggered that Ethel was a dyke. As she aged, firmly single and unromantic, they had claimed she was a transsexual wrestler. When she reached fifty, they had started saying she was eccentric. At sixty, they had called her crazy.

The jibes always hurt, though she concealed it. After each year was over, fortunately, all she could remember were the names and faces of those whose lives she had affected.

Standing at *Queequeg*'s bow, she left a long scimitar of foam as she circled the buildings. The old school was disappearing, windows shattered, corridors full of stagnant water. She had taken *Queequeg* inside once before to her old classroom, but was eventually driven out by the reek of decomposing flesh from a cat that had been trapped inside and starved.

Ethel closed her eyes, hearing once again the clatter of the period bell, the clamor as kids ran through the corridors, talking at the top of their lungs. Mothers whom she taught had sent their daughters to Hull High School. In her last few years, she had even taught a few granddaughters of former students. Made you proud.

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The high school was shut down, dark, and noiseless. Seagulls perched on its roof were her only companions.

To break her mood, she swung onto the open sea and opened the throttle for the five-mile run to South Boston.

The water, hard as a rock this morning, pounded into her calves and knees as the Boston whaler's flat bottom washboarded across the harbor. *Queequeg* kicked up spray over his teak and chrome bow as she slalomed among dayglo styrofoam lobster buoys, tasting the salt spume on her lips.

Behind and above her, a cawing flock of gulls followed, braiding the air. *Queequeg*'s wake pushed small fish close to the surface, under the sharp eyes of the waiting gray and white birds. One after another, the gulls swooped like a line of fighter aircraft. Their flapping wings skimming the waves, they dipped their beaks just enough to catch a fish, then soared back into line.

Hunting and feeding, they escorted her across the harbor until she slowed and docked at the pier.

"Hey, Jerry," Ethel said when she entered the store. "Got a letter for you." She unzipped her slicker and pulled it out. "Mail it for me?"

The storekeeper squinted at the address. "Joan Gordon? Doesn't she live in that senior citizen community in Arlington?"

"Old folks home, you mean."

"Whatever." He suppressed a smile. "You could call her."

"Got no phone."

"No, from here."

"Rather write."

"Okay. What are you writing about?"

Ethel shook her head. "None of your beeswax."

"All right," he laughed, "we've been friends too long for me to complain. How you doing?"

"I get by."

He leaned on the counter. "I worry about you."

"Oh, don't start."

"Sorry." He turned away and began rearranging cans.

"I'm okay," she answered, touched as always.

"Hull gets worse every day." He looked at her over his shoulder. "I see the news."

"Nonsense," Ethel replied with bravado, dismissing his fears with a wave of her hand. "Journalists always exaggerate. Besides, one day *Boston* will be underwater too, same as us."

"I know." Jerry sighed. "I go down to the bathhouse every Sunday for

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my swim. The sea's always higher. Maybe we should move away, like Joan did. Chicago or Dallas. Somewhere. Anywhere with no ocean."

She laughed. "What would I do in Dallas, Jerry? How would I live?"

"You could teach school. You've taught me more right here in this store than all the history books I ever read."

"Thanks, Jerry. But I'm sixty-eight years old. No one would hire me."

He was quiet. "Then I'd take care of you," he said finally, kneading his hands.

She looked through the window at the pier, where *Queequeg* bobbed on the waves. "Couldn't do it, Jerry," she said. It was hard to find breath. "Too old to move."

"Yeah. Sure." He wiped his forehead and cleared his throat. "Got your usual all set." He put two orange plastic bags on the counter.

"Did my check come through?" Ethel looked suspicious. "Can't take your credit."

"Of course it did. It always comes through. It's electronic."

She peered inside, shifting cans and boxes. "All right, where is it?"

He scowled and rubbed his balding head. "Hell, you shouldn't eat that stuff. Rots your teeth and wrecks your digestion and I don't *know* what."

"I want my two-pound box of Whitman's coconut, dammit."

"Ethel, you're carrying too much weight. It'll strain your heart."

"Been eating candy all my life, and it hasn't hurt me yet. Wish you'd stop trying to dictate my diet."

"Okay, okay." He sighed and threw up his hands, then pulled down the embossed yellow box. "No charge." He held it out.

"Can't accept your charity, Jerry. You know that."

"That's not it." He was hurt and offended. "It's my way of saying I'm sorry I tried to keep it away from you." He gestured with the box. "Please?"

Ethel took the chocolates. "Thank you, Jerry," she replied somberly, laying her right hand flat on the cover. "You've been a good friend."

"Don't talk like that!" the grocer said in exasperation. "Every time you come in here, you sound like you got one foot in the grave. It's not wholesome."

"Was different this morning." Ethel sat down, the candy held tightly in her lap. Her voice was faint, distant. "This morning I *saw* it. Saw my future in the water. Sooner or later, I'm going to pass away. No sense denying that." She kicked her right foot aimlessly. "Maybe I should have accepted when you proposed."

"Still could," he said, wistful. "But you won't."

"No." She shook her head just a bit.

"Stubborn."

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"Not stubborn." She was gentle. "Wouldn't be fair. You can't live in Hull. You've said so before."

"Ethel." Jerry wiped his hands on his apron. "I read the paper. Houses are falling into the ocean or burning down. Dangerous evil kids are running loose."

"I can handle the waterkids," she said defiantly.

"No, you *can't*," he insisted. "Drugs and crime and I don't *know* what. Why won't you leave?"

"It's my home," Ethel said in a troubled voice. "My family. Friends." She waved her hands. "My world. What I know."

Jerry rubbed his head again. "That world isn't *there* any more. The people you knew—they're all gone. It's past. Over."

"Got no place to go," she muttered, biting her thumbnail. "Cobbs and Goodwins have lived in Hull since colonial times. That's something to preserve. Elijah Goodwin was a merchant captain. Sailed to China in 1820. Put flowers on his grave every Sunday noon after church. Rain or shine or Cambodian kids. Put flowers on all the Cobbs and Goodwins on Telegraph Hill. Telegraph's an island now, but they will still be in that ground when all the flatland has gone under. Somebody has to remember them."

"Cripes, don't be so morbid." He came around behind her, put his arm around her shoulder and rubbed it.

"I suppose." She leaned her head in the crook of his elbow.

Cars and buses passed in the street outside, sunlight reflecting off their windshields. He patted her shoulder.

She covered his hand with hers. "Thanks, Jerry. You're a good man."

After a moment, she rose and kissed his cheek, then hefted the bags, one to an arm. "Well, that's that," she called with returning jauntiness. "See you next Friday."

Lost in memories, she let *Queequeg* take his return trip more slowly. Islands in the harbor were covered with trees and shrubs, reminding her of great submerged whales. When she neared Hog Island, at the entrance to Hull Bay, she kept a respectful distance. The Meagher boys had lived there—Dennis, Douglas, Dana, Donald, and Dapper. Their mother had always shouted for them in the order of their birth. Five rambunctious Boston-Irish hellions in seven years, usually with a black eye or a skinned knee.

No families lived on Hog now. Castellated gray buildings had grown upward from the old Army fortress underneath. Thieves and smugglers and murderers lived in them, men who drove deep-keeled power yachts without finesse, like machetes through a forest.

Tough sentries carrying binoculars stood lookout as she passed, scan-

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ning the horizon like big-eyed insects, their rifles out of sight. Ethel shivered. Delinquent waterkids she could evade, but the organized evil on Hog was shrewd and ruthless.

The fish feeding on that poor child's face, Ethel thought. The people who still lived on Hull. The men on Hog. The Cambodian kids. One way or another, all took their livelihoods from the remains of a town whose time was past. Eventually they would extract Hull's last dollar, and they would all leave. And, in time, the rising sea would engulf everything.

K Street was falling into shadow when she returned. Her house needed a coat of paint, but would last long enough without one, she thought wryly. The dark-green first-floor shutters were closed and nailed shut as a precaution, but her light was still burning in 22 K's bedroom window. Always leave a light on, so everyone knows you're still on guard.

A gang symbol was sprayed on her front door.

Pran chop, she realized with a sick feeling in her gut, remembering the morning's encounter.

Her padlock was untouched, though the waterkids could have easily forced it.

The chop was a message: this is a Pran house.

Perhaps their form of thanks.

Safely inside, Ethel took off her sou'wester and slicker, shook the wet salt spray off them, and hung them on the pegs. She unloaded her groceries and stacked her day's combings. Tomorrow she would sell them in the Quincy flea market.

All but the photo. Ethel took it from her pocket and smiled at Luisa's young face. She found a spot on the wall barely large enough and tacked it up, stepping back to admire her work.

As the sun set on the golden bay, she made supper: soup, salad, and cheese sandwiches that she grilled on the woodburning stove she had installed on the second floor. Seagulls wheeled over the marsh flats, snatching clams in their beaks. Rising high over the coastline, the birds dropped their prey to smash open on the wet shoreline rocks. Then the gulls landed and ate the helpless, exposed animal inside the broken shell.

When she was done, Ethel went onto the upper porch and put down her bowl and plate. The birds converged, jostling for the last scraps, hungry and intense, like schoolchildren in gray and white uniforms.

Sitting in her rocking chair, her box of Whitman's coconut firmly on her stomach, Ethel thought about the letter she had mailed that morning.

> Today the ocean took my ground floor. One day it will take my house. It's going to reclaim South Boston and Dorchester and Back Bay. Folks will go on denying it like I've tried to, but it won't stop until it's through with all of us.

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Enclosed is my will. Had a Cohasset lawyer write it up so it's legal. You get everything. You don't have to comb for it, Joan. It's yours.

Except *Queequeg*. The boat goes to Jerry. He'll never use it, but he'll care for it, and it's no use to you in your tower.

After I'm gone, burn the place down. With me in it. At high tide so the fire won't spread. Nobody will bother you. Nobody else lives around here anyway. No one else has lived here for years.

22 K is a Cobb house. Always been a Cobb house. No squatters here. Give it all to the sea.

But take the pictures first. Put them on your walls. Remember me. Remember me.

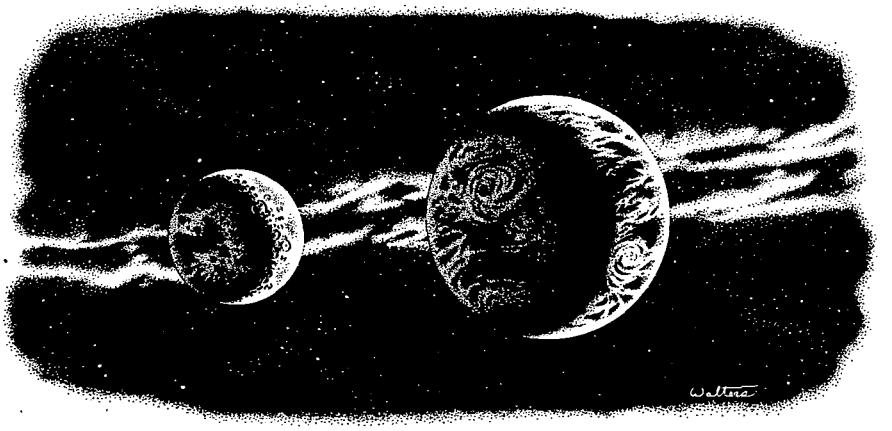
Should have left years ago. Can't now.

Wish you'd stayed, Joan. Miss you.

Ethel

The houses around her were black hulks, silent like trees. The crescent moon rose, silvering the ocean. Ethel heard the gulls call to one another, smelled the sea as it licked the beach. In the distance, boats moved on the bay, dots of green and red light, thin black lines of wake.

"God, I love it here," she said suddenly, full of contentment. ●



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SHAMAN

by John Shirley

John Shirley is the author of *Eclipse* (Warner Books) and *A Splendid Chaos* (Franklin Watts). His last story in *IAsfm*, "The Incorporated" (July 1985), was an exciting tale of the near future and one man's battle with a grasping multinational. He returns to our pages with another hard-edged look at an America which may be upon us sooner than we think.

art: J.K. Potter.

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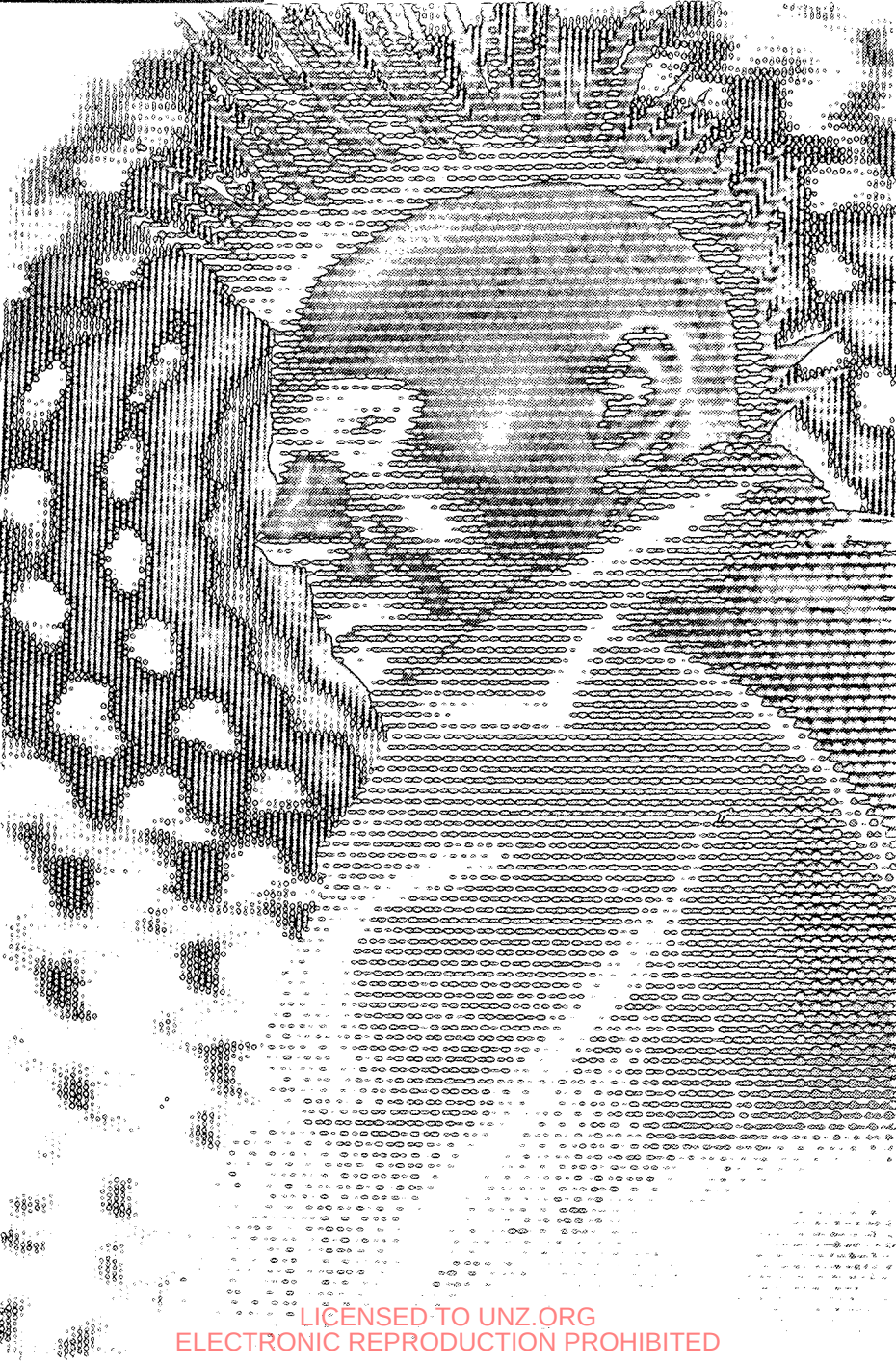

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Quinn was crossing the street in southeastern Manhattan on a hot summer night, hands on his head, with a terrorist submachine gun at his back—when he saw the luminous skullhead of the vinyl batwinged cop-car banshee.

First he saw the PAV, the Police Assault Van, on its way to a black-out riot; it was pushing a double pool of headlight glow ahead of it as it screamed by on Delancey. Glimpsed as it flashed past, the armored cop-car was a grey blur mohawked with a streak of red glow; its cherrytop a con trail of hellish shine against the dirty darkness of the sweltering, blacked-out inner city.

And then came the hallucination, vision, or whatever it was, rising above the building the PAV had passed behind. . . . Weightless, but big as an armored car, the banshee spread its vinyl batwings and lifted its fiery head over the roof-rim; it pulled itself into the sky, and he saw that its head was a translucent-red human skull shining with the whirling electric lights that were its brains, its mouth a sirening bullhorn, its body a bulked-out pterodactyl of studded grey metal. Quinn gaped, and looked at the others . . . but their eyes were focused entirely on survival, on getting across the street. He was certain they couldn't see it.

I'm over the edge, he thought. Oh, shit.

The terrorist jabbed the gun-muzzle into Quinn's back, and he looked away from the thing in the sky; he lurched on, crossed the street.

That was on the night of the summer's third blackout, July 18, 2011. He saw the banshee at 10:10 P.M.

At 9:45 P.M., twenty-five minutes earlier, before the fabric of consensual reality began to reweave itself, he was just stepping out of the subway station . . .

Quinn and Cisco and Zizz emerged from the subway station, laughing over some inane joke. They were laughing to cover being scared, because this was sniper territory. Coming out behind them, Bowler wasn't laughing. Bowler was grim as a granite crag, disapproving of any departure from the Two-tone seriousness of Radical Purpose.

Trying not to wonder where the crosshairs were centered, they climbed gratefully from the rancid, moldering underground into the sloppy heat of the summer night. They'd walked through a pedestrian tunnel that led from the Sixth Street station to this one. The blue emergency lighting system for the subway tunnels was running, despite the black-out, so there was light down there, but it was infused with another kind of darkness: the clammy darkness of screwed-down, bridled fear. Thinking about the Fridge. And Deirdre.

They stood around in a small, worn-out park, sixty square feet of packed dirt, expiring grass, grafitti'd benches, young trees shriveled like

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burnt matches from acid rain. The park was in the triangle between several intersecting streets. It wasn't completely dark here; a web-gloss of light stretched from the lit-up part of the city, north of Houston. And there was a little illumination from two light-storage billboards—during the day they soaked up sun-power, gave it out at night with the brash glow of commerce—advertising the Panam low-orbit shuttle (*Fifteen minutes to Paris!*) and, across the square from the Panam billboard: *Protect your health with Doc Johnson's Intravenous Sex: Makes partners obsolete!* The shopfronts were dark. Quinn could make out a People's Republic of China Chinese food franchise, with its cartoon of a jolly Mao in a chef's hat; discount boutiques, shops selling remaindered consumer-junk; and the double-padlocked entrances to the big underground malls. He and the others leaned on the rusting iron frames of children's swings, the swing-chains missing, nearby stood metal-mesh trashcans crimped like cigarette butts, overflowing with plastic and tin and scrap-paper: the shed skins of slithery junk food.

In the distance, the sirens: rising and falling. How long before the Feds checked out Funs territory? Quinn wondered. Or before one of the black-out riots spread to this neighborhood? Maybe it depended on who had attacked the power station this time. Which Faction: Christian Funs, Moslem Funs, an-esthets, Movement, Media Thugs, whomever . . . there were conflicting rumors.

Quinn turned to Bowler, who was ostenstibly the leader of the rescue party. "What now?"

Bowler rumbled, "We have to wait here. This is the edge of the Funs territory." He nodded toward a luminous-blue Moslem Fundamentalist slogan sprayed in Arab script across the asphalt park path. "They'll contact us. Or they'll decide . . ." He let it trail off, and they knew he meant the snipers.

Looking around, Quinn spotted more of the Funs tags, fresh-looking, overtop the other graffiti, and rain-spotted postors of the boyish, spectacled Ayatollah Daseheimi slapped up with glueguns on walls, benches. He wondered where the crosshairs were now . . . on the back of his neck, on his forehead, the base of his spine?

Maybe the rescue pact had been a mistake; maybe it was childish and arrogant and unrealistic, even with the video key-cassette (thinking that, he absently touched the bulge of the little cassette in his shirt pocket), to think they could break Deirdre out of the Fridge. But anyway it was following through. It was commitment.

Quinn—tall, thin, wispy blond, big-nosed, with one green eye and one blue eye—had been inconsistent for all of twenty-four years. He tried to define himself in little ways, like dressing in monochrome; all black or all white or all red. "Start with your clothes," Quinn's Dad had always

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told him. "Start outside, work inward." One of his Dad's wildly superficial platitudes. (His Dad was dressed by professional designers before he hit the stage; he had a superstitious faith in costuming.) But under the threads Quinn was erratic at everything, and bitterly knew it; he was a lapsed Columbia U Video Arts student. He joined organizations in great enthusiasms and never went to the second meeting; sometimes read heaps of books in a week, other times went months without reading anything to the end; played bass in a band but never rehearsed enough. Gave up drugs but never quite gave them up. Committed himself to girls with deep, resonant, romantic conviction—sometimes three or four a month that way.

Zizz had said once, "Maybe it's the *mon*-eeeeey, huuuuhhh?" Maybe it was just too easy to fall back on the annuities, the money from his Dad, the retreat into the womb of his High Security Housing apartment. No motivation to follow through, because when things got hard . . .

Tonight, though, he'd made up his mind. . . . Tonight he wore all black: a black T-shirt, black guerrilla baggies tucked into black skinhead boots. The color of commitment. Because it was Deirdre who'd first made him really look at himself. It was Deirdre who had shown him what committment could be . . .

So he stayed, and waited to see if the snipers would kill him.

Zizz, whistling and talking to herself in a sing-song whisper, swinging on the postage-stamp playground's monkey bars now, seemed to have forgotten all about the snipers, and the fact that this was Moslem Funs territory. Zizz was female, but you had to look twice to see it; she was a squat, pallid an-esthet*; her hair was bleached bone-white, blown out like some hungry tidal pool creature; her eyesockets were blacked with heavy kohl. She could've co-starred in an episode of *Vampire Girls*. The Walkman capsule plugged into her right ear was gradually destroying auditory nerve-ends with one of the Shaped Static bands, *Fucked-Up Heaven*. The left ear clustered with rings and screws twisted right through the cartilage. Dangling from her left wrist was a sort of doll, four inches long, a primitive thing cunningly wrought of brightly colored electric wires and bits of circuitry; it had a little silver wire like a tongue sticking out of its mouth . . .

Under a transparent plastic skirt she wore a clinging grey body stocking woven with micro signal-sensitive image reactants that reproduced the imagery in TV signals randomly across her short, stocky body; a news flash about the black-out in lower Manhattan was TV-imaged across her torso, the newscaster, his head warped to the contours of her

*"An-esthet": someone into Anarchy Esthetics.

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belly, was mouthing soundlessly while above him a sex-com's nude actress did a comic double-take as her father came on to her.

"What do we gotta hang he-errrre for huh, Bowl-errr?" Zizz asked, pouting, snorting a hit of designer meth from her thumbnail-implanted stashbox; getting off, she did a few listless and abbreviated an-esthet steps to something on her ear-tape. "I mean, we can't find Deirdre like this, this is bullll-*shii*-iiit." Zizz was twenty; she had the squeaky voice of a seven year old.

Bowler glared at her. "You think we're going to a concert? This is *Funs* territory. We can't go through it till they check us out." He was big, wore an olive drab T-shirt and olive-drab fatigues and colorless boots; a bristling black beard spilled down over his collarbone, spread to nearly merge with his dreadlocks. Hooked nose, sunken eyes. Deep voice that went with his Rasputin look. You could see the white all the way around his bullet-hole pupils. He was forty; the others were in their twenties. Bowler rarely slept. Took too many vitamins. Saw himself as a political visionary. Had bad teeth. Read Marcuse and *Das Kapital*—unabridged—from midnight till dawn.

"Maybe," Cisco said, turning a frozen smile at the rooftops, wondering where the Funs were, "this isn't the time. Maybe it's, like, not the right vibe." Cisco was half-Puerto Rican, half-Israeli. He was short, stocky; big brown lady-killer eyes with thick black lashes, mouth a little too wide, lips a little too thick, curly black hair, offwhite East Indian shirt and rope-belt pants and sandals. He didn't bathe often enough but his sweat smelled like chicken soup so no one complained till it accumulated for a few weeks. He was twenty-four, a neo-beat poet, a self-styled mystic—a pain in the ass about it, too.

"The time to get Deirdre out is now. We have the in at the HopeScope tonight," Bowler said, with resonant authority. He was trying not to look directly at the rooftops. "We have to risk it because Deirdre would've done anything for us. She *did* do everything for us. She knew what would happen if she blew the whistle on FedControl, Cisco."

"I know, man, it's not that I don't think we owe it to her, it's just, I don't know, the aspects, the omens, they're not—"

Quinn couldn't stand any more. "*Will* you shut the fuck up, Cisco? If you didn't wanna risk it, you shouldn't have come."

"Who you mad at, *Quii*-iiinnn?" Zizz asked, grinning at him. "You mad at Cisco because you scared too huh, don't want him to talk about it *huhhhh?"* She put her hand on his arm. "Me too." With those two words, her vocal affectation had vanished. She had a thing for him, he knew, and thinking about the possibilities made him shudder—and at the same time it made him think: Maybe it'd be all right . . .

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She irritated him. But he liked the way she made the effort, at least, to see into him. Maybe she'd understand him, if they got involved . . .

Involved? Sure. Like they were going to survive this. Breaking into the Fridge . . .

At first, Quinn and the others actually, honestly, really believed they could break Deirdre out of the country's most impregnable prison. The incandescence of their outrage at what had happened to Deirdre blotted out sweet reason with its glare. And when Bowler had come to Deirdre's friends with his plan to use the Middle Man, they'd gone for it.

Now, though . . . now, taking the first step, they began to think about it, to turn it over and over like a blind man with a 3-D puzzle; and they knew it was insane, there was no getting into the Fridge, except for the One Way entry that Deirdre had.

But no one wanted to be the first to say, Let's blow it off, this is impossible, this is the wrong way on a one-way street, Deirdre can't ask this of us . . .

Quinn said, "I'm tired of waiting. Can't we contact them or something?"

Bowler was peering into the shadows of the storefronts across the street. "We're doing that. You're supposed to stand here, in this spot, if you want to talk to them, and then their *Mufti* comes out. Or they snipe you."

"Or both, in proper sequence," someone said, behind them.

They turned, half expecting to be shot before they got a good look at whoever it was. But the H&K laserscope-equipped carbine hung on its strap over the little man's left shoulder, casual as a carrybag, pointed at the ground. He could afford to be casual, because of the snipers.

The Funs guerrilla was about five foot six, slender; there were sharply defined veins on his hands and forearms; he wasn't as dark as Quinn had expected. He wore a white short sleeve shirt, neatly creased black trousers. Only the boots were military. He looked like the manager of a Middle Eastern restaurant. Maybe he was that, too. He had white-metal wire rim glasses, like the boy Ayatollah—the Ayatollah didn't approve of eye implants: he believed they could be used by the implanters for mind control. The boy Ayatollah had a tradition of paranoia to live up to.

The Fun said, matter of factly: "I'm Jabbar. We were told you were coming. We were not told why. You are the children of our enemies." He looked at Zizz. A television PAV chasing a lawbreaker wound its way over her hip and across her belly; the climactic genital-slashing scene from *Realm of the Senses* played on her thigh. "You are decadents."

He left the implication hanging, swaying, kicking.

Jabbar, Quinn thought. It didn't feel like an Iranian name. Maybe it was true: that the boy Ayatollah had united the Arabs and Persians . . .

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"We wanta get Deirdre," Zizz said. Surprisingly serious.

"The Middle Man agreed to help us," Bowler said.

"And tonight all the transport's fucked up, like," Cisco said. "We can't get through to HopeScope, where the Middle Man is, without going through your piece of things."

They were all in a hurry to explain. They could feel the crosshairs.

Jabbar made a cone of his lips. "Deirdre. You are friends of hers?"

Bowler nodded. "We work with her. For everyone in this area, against FedControl."

"You might be CIAD." Meaning CIA Domestic.

Bowler shook his head. "We're Movement."

"Anyone would say this," Jabbar pointed out.

"Deirdre used to talk about the . . . about *your* movement," Quinn said. Not knowing quite how it had come out of him. "She said, 'All they're doing is making the invisible injustice visible.' And she said, 'Terrorism is easy to condemn when you've got other avenues open to you.'"

Jabbar nodded, a flicker of amusement at the corners of his mouth. "The Fedayeen know this saying. We know Deirdre. We don't know you. We almost shot you. You were standing in the place, but you did not have your hands on your head. That is the rest of the signal, and it states that you are unarmed."

Instantly, Bowler, Cisco, Quinn, and Zizz put their hands on their heads.

Quinn's mouth went dry. They'd agreed to come with Bowler because he was the guy in the Movement who was supposed to know all the ins and outs over here. Only, it looked like he didn't. Great. Quinn said, "Sorry. Didn't know."

Jabbar motioned with his gun, "You'll come with me."

That's when they crossed the street, heading for the store-front opposite, where another man stood in the doorway with an auto-shotgun in his hands. Quinn was thinking: *An auto-shotgun. God, what that'd do to you*—and that's when the PAV went by, heading for a black-out riot, and the banshee rose over the building . . .

It came, and began to fade, like the after-image of a bright light on his retina—and then the terrorist Jabbar prodded him. They crossed the street, and entered the old storefront.

The windows of the storefront had been boarded over; its entrance was choked with trash. Inside, in the dim, waxy light of a chem-lantern, Quinn saw stacks of cardboard boxes against the flaking plaster walls; a few on the floor were open, and he saw that they contained racks of import-banned silicon wafers, chips, AI brain-units, cartons of untaxed

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cigarettes and syntharettes and liquors. The black market paid for the Funs' guerrilla ordnance.

Jabbar picked up the lantern and led the way; two other men came behind, herding them into a crowded back room that contained a desk, a dead computer terminal, two phones, and the accumulated reek of unfiltered cigarettes and strong coffee. The two dark men stood in the doorway, smoking.

Quinn had never had a hallucination before, and the banshee had left him shaken. But being trapped in a small room with hostile guerrillas armed to the teeth somehow put everything but *right now* out of his mind . . .

Jabbar hung the lantern from a hook in the corner of a ceiling. The lantern swung slightly on its hook, making the shadows in the room leap and yaw. In the same corner, Jabbar bent to fish through a heap of posters and Arab-lettered newspapers; he drew out a flat cardboard box. He carried it to the desk and opened it, laid the contents on the desk.

It was a video painting, switched off. A rectangular chunk of glass and plastic, two feet by three feet by two inches. "Deirdre's sister was Movement, and we knew her," Jabbar said, looking up at them. "She gave us this painting. She said everyone in the Movement knew it by heart. If you are Movement, you know it."

Breathless, Quinn stared at the painting as Jabbar switched it on. There were many Movement video paintings. But there was one he knew by heart, because he'd made it himself, at NYU. And Deirdre had been a bit vain about it . . .

The painting flickered through a series of street-shots (Quinn knew immediately: it was his) outside the squat slums; high contrast images of weirdly well-dressed kids who lived in the squats gathered at oil-barrel fires; of Smoky "the Ghost" Casparino—his face hidden, but that was his spray-painted flight-jacket—buying a gun from D'Angelo, whose face was white from heavy chipping on synthcoke; a skateboard gang showing off their moves for the camera; old Mrs. Pesca with her sawed-off shotgun and collapsed grin. And paced through the loop, images of Deirdre: tall, angular, jet-black skin, cheek punctured with a stud imprinted *NFC*—No Federal Control—in red on black. Deirdre ministering to the kids, the black marketeers, the beleagured old ladies, talking till she was hoarse, telling them that FedControl wasn't all powerful, it was going to fail in its drive to move them out of Manhattan and into the little security-cop police states they called Highrise Relocation. . . . Telling them that Federal Control had promised their boros to the wealthy development barons. . . . Telling them it was just plain stupid to trade home and something like freedom for a cop-haunted high rise that would slide into a slum in two years. . . .

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Flick flick flick, three moving images just that fast, and every fourth one was of Dierdre.

Jabbar stabbed a button on the frame, freezing the painting on an image of Deirdre setting up a corner video re-education booth, vidding the slums the truth about FedControl's part in the Brazilian War and what happened to anyone who joined the Army. . .

"What comes after this?" Jabbar asked.

"There are lots of Movement paintings," Bowler said desperately. "We can't—"

"It'll be a shot of a kid watching a TV-graffiti pattern with Deirdre's name in it," Quinn interrupted. He turned to Bowler. "I oughta know. I shot it myself."

Jabbar hit the button. The painting moved on, and a small child with his back to the camera sat watching as video-animated words snaked in superimposition over the President's face: *Deirdre says don't listen to liars . . .*

Jabbar noded. "Okay." He pointed the gun at Quinn. "Now tell me with complete truth, what is it you are to do, eh? What? Because I know you've lied to me. You are Movement, but you are lying."

Quinn looked at the muzzle of the gun. He could hear his heart hammering, far away somewhere, like a distant construction site noise. "Uhhh . . . We told you. We've going to get Deirdre out."

"Deirdre is in the Fridge," Jabbar said, an impatient adult with a dense child. The flickering light from the video painting lit his face from below, shifting its planes in eerie dislocation. "No one can be broken from there. If you say that is what you do then you are stupid or liars."

Quinn looked at Bowler, eyebrows lifted. Bowler chose to tell the truth, as he saw it. "We're going to see the Shaman. The Middle Man. But not because I think there's anything to his, you know, ah, claims about the Spirits of the Urban Wilderness, any of it. I think they've got some kind of hardware or wetware access to the FedControl grid. Whatever they've got," Bowler went on, talking fast, "it seems to work. Deirdre herself swore it worked for her once. Only, the Middle Man is probably a schizophrenic so he interprets things . . . you know, mystically."

Quinn thought about the banshee. *Spirits of the Urban Wilderness* . . . but all he said was, "Bowler made arrangements to go to the Middle Man because he thinks the Middle Man could get Deirdre out of the Fridge. We got to get there at a certain time. And the black-outs brought the riot squads down, they've sealed off the other ways through. The only way left to get through is . . . here. Through your territory. We need an escort so your people don't shoot us."

"A way to get into the Fridge." Jabbar's nostrils flared, his eyes hard-

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ened. "If it's true, then you will take our people out, too. We have four in the Fridge." He fingered the gun meaningfully.

"I told you, Bowler," Cisco muttered. "The vibes were—"

"No, this is *greaaa-aaaat!*" Zizz broke in, doing a little spastic dance that made two of the guerrillas look at each other and snort. "We could get them out, too! We could—"

Bowler shook his head. "One will be hard enough. We have a video key for her cell. We need the Middle Man to get us past the guards and failsafes and cameras. We only have one video key."

"A bomb!" Zizz suggested gleefully. "We could get in, then blow up their com-pu-uuu-ter! Then maybe all the cells would open up and—"

Quinn groaned. He felt the sweat sticking his shirt to his back. The room seemed chokingly close. "Zizz," Quinn hissed, "stop trying to help before you help us into even deeper shit."

"No, it's not a bad idea," Jabbar said, looking at Zizz with a new respect. "A bomb in their master computer."

Bowler shook his head so hard you could hear his beard rustle. "No! Listen—"

"No, *you* listen—if you are going to break out your people," Jabbar said, grinding the words between his teeth, "and you want our help, then you will break out our people, too! We will provide the explosive."

He had lifted the SMG, was pointing its muzzle at Bowler's face.

Zizz's expression shifted radically in a split second, from glee to a grim *uh-oh*. She saw that she'd blown it.

She moved closer to Quinn. Out of the corner of his eye he saw her take the little wire-doll dangling from her wrist . . .

She jabbed its tongue-wire into Quinn's forearm. Quinn jerked his arm away, sucked in his breath, and felt . . .

A flash of white light; a wave of white heat.

Quinn went rigid. Electrified within. Paralyzed. He felt a Presence. Someone . . .

Click. Suddenly he was standing outside himself. He was tethered but detached, off in a dark corner, unseen, apart from the others, watching himself, seeing an expression on his face that had never been there before.

He couldn't smell or hear anything—except he heard his own voice. It was talking nonsense. No, it was talking in Arabic, to Jabbar. He, Quinn, was speaking Arabic. He had no idea *how* to speak Arabic. Not one lesson. But he was doing it. And he knew what the words meant in English:

"Jabbar! The Fridge is wall-to-wall biomonitoring. The prisoners are all in restraints, on IV medifeeds and spinebox. They can't move unless the spinebox moves them. The cyberguards watch them, they never sleep,

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they never take a break, they're always there—if you destroy the master computer they and the rest of the equipment might do anything. It isn't necessarily going to shut down—it might feed the prisoners overdoses of medication, the guards might get confused and mistake them for attackers. The bottom line is, if you destroy that computer the system will break down and the people plugged into it will die. Including your men." Cisco and Bowler were staring at him; the physical part of him. Outright amazed.

Jabbar got over his surprise and replied in Arabic, "Why should we help you if it does not release our people? If we're involved and the Feds find out, they'll push us even harder. Already they fabricate this blackout to harass us, to try to drive us out. Already they raid us twice a month, when they can find us. To provoke them further would not advance our cause, not now. It would be too much pressure. In our position, we have learned how much trouble we can make and still survive. We're not fools."

"Deirdre struggles for your cause. She spoke up against the new anti-Muslim immigration laws. She spoke up and said that you were being harassed, driven to urban war, because the Christian Fundamentalists are taking over government; she said you were being framed and prosecuted and jailed and deported only because of the prejudice against Moslems. She spoke up so many times they had to get rid of her. So they planted illegal chemicals in her house, bomb-making equipment. The irony is unspeakable. Deirdre, a bomber! Countless were the times at the Movement meetings when she argued against bombs. She said bombs couldn't discriminate civilians. But FedControl framed her, they said she was a terrorist bomber, and that gave them the authority to put her in the Fridge, to sentence her to conditioning. She spoke up for you, for all of us—and they kidnapped her! Superficially legal—but kidnapping, Jabbar! Surely Allah tells you now what you must do . . ."

Jabbar gaped at him.

Then Quinn—the watching, detached part of Quinn—fell into a red tube, and passed through a wall of pain. Through white light, a wave of heat . . .

Click. He was back in himself, bathed in sweat, shaking, but . . . alone in his body now.

Everyone was staring at him. "This one," Jabbar said, slowly, in English, "has cared enough to learn our language. Has spoken good sense. He has moved me. I am the Mufti and that is my judgment."

A sloppy breeze, moldy-damp from the East River, oozed between the ruined tenements, and carried some heat away from Quinn and Bowler

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and Zizz and Cisco and the Mufti as they trudged down the middle of the rubbled street.

Quinn felt strange. Still a little dislocated; like he was here and not here. Zizz did this to him, somehow. The doll. Its wire tongue . . .

Quinn dropped back and whispered to Zizz, "What did you do to me back there? You fucking inject me or *what?*"

Zizz bit her lip to keep from giggling. "I did what the Fetish Broker told me. She said if there was a 'mergency—"

"What? Who's the—"

"She works for the Middle Man, sent the doll around when Bowler made the—"

The Mufti turned and hissed, "No talk!" He gestured toward the rooftops.

The buildings were picked out with a little starlight, and with the soft edges of firelight from clearings in the rubble: smudges of red on the black-pocked wall of night. Fragments of Arabic and Farsi and Lebanese reached them and fell away as they moved through Lower East Manhattan. They were still in Moslem Funs territory but only barely. The precarious ceasefire had crystalized the Moslem and Christian zones on their respective sides of Clinton Street. National Guard barriers and checkpoints stood there still, a block West; nearer were the stripped chassis of military trucks and the burned shells of blasted cars, humped in shadow like the dessicated carcasses of Badlands buffalo.

Quinn stiffened every time they came to a cross street, since intersections exposed them to the strong possibility of sniper fire from the Christian sectors; tonight of all nights, with the cops and soldiers massively occupied by the black-out riots, would be a great night to start something, to pick off a few Funs . . .

And the Christian snipers wouldn't know at this distance that Quinn and friends didn't belong in their gunsights. If they knew who they were, they'd probably shoot anyway: Quinn's bunch came from the Registered Socialist boro.

Quinn almost wished someone would open fire. Something to break up the flow of events, the current that tugged him deeper into this thing. He was so scared he didn't recognize the sensation at first. He'd never been that scared before. It was a ball of shaking tautness in his gut, like a rabbit having a heart attack.

Something had taken him over, back there. It was gone now, but . . . he felt its footprints on his nervous system. And that scared him more than bullets or bombs or even the Fridge.

But no one fired at them. Ten minutes later, Bowler said, "Here's the HopeScope."

It was a bank.

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* * *

Quinn sat in a locker room, on an old wooden bench, his back to a cool concrete wall, trying to remember how he'd come here. The Mufti had left them, and Bowler had given Quinn a slip of paper with some numbers on it, and a bank card. Anyway it looked like a bank card . . .

"Here," Bowler had said. "Put it in the Instanteller slot."

"What? That thing's trashed—"

"Just do it. You're going in."

"Why me?"

"I don't know. . . . They said it was you." Bowler was looking at him strangely. A little angrily. "What did you do back there? Babbling in . . . I mean, you didn't tell me that you could speak—"

"I can't. I don't know what happened."

Bowler shifted his weight and looked at the bank, frowning. "I don't like this mumbo-jumbo. Occultism is religion and religion is social paralysis. I thought the Middle Man was . . ." He shook his head. He reached out and closed Quinn's hand around the slip of paper and the card. "Fuck. Just do it."

"Tell you the truth, I'm kind of—"

"We're all scared, man. But do it for Deirdre."

Quinn took a deep breath. He looked at Zizz. Saw her swallow; saw her skull-eye makeup was streaked. He found himself wanting to take her in his arms. And then he thought: You want to get into that with *Zizz?* Are you kidding? But the feeling lingered.

He reached into his shirt pocket, took out the video key-cassette, and handed it to her. Some instinct: Give it to her and not Bowler. Their hands touched for a moment and he found himself giving her fingers a dry, shaky squeeze.

Then he turned and made himself walk up to the grime-streaked face of the Instanteller. He looked at it dubiously, not expecting it to be functional in any way at all. The money dispenser was in a bank whose roof had collapsed; whose windows were opaque with graffiti. But he'd inserted the card, the teller had lit up, and he'd looked at the piece of paper, tapped out . . .

Couldn't remember the code now. Numbers. He'd felt a ripple go through him, heard a sort of buzzing, and smelled something burning. There was a faint vibration at the top of his head. That's all: then all the doors of his perception had silently closed.

He'd awakened here. A fluorescent light overhead, and another tube down a little ways, that one blinking and going *Zzt-zzt-zzt.* Long rectangular room, forgotten grey-green lockers against the far wall; rusty pipes

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overhead and rust-flecked puddles of water on the floor. A locker room, for sure. What did a locker room have to do with a bank?

No Bowler or Cisco or Zizz. Quinn had fallen asleep standing up, never felt himself hit the ground, and then he was here, sitting against the wall, all alone. How?

There was someone sitting beside him.

They hadn't been there a second before. But hey: His brain was probably fogged from the whatever-it-was. The guy must've come in while he was spacing out, trying to remember. Sure.

He was just another guy. Street sleeper, looked like. Matted hair, matted beard, shared a grey-black skin with the city. The same coating of atmospheric silt and simple dirt. Long horny yellow nails. No shoes, clothes unrecognizable from sleeping in them. Probably smelled bad, if you got any closer: the guy sat slumped against the wall just out of the direct light, about eight feet away. Another devotee, another supplicant to the HopeScope. Supposedly the Middle Man helped anybody he chose, and he chose almost at random.

"What you going to get?" The guy asked, just like someone who was planning to get something here himself.

"Help a friend. How about you?"

"Kinda obvious isn't it? Someplace to rest my butt and maybe a grade D credit rating. That ain't much."

"You could've applied to move into the Socialist boro, they'll give you—"

"I look like a fucking Red to you?"

You barely even look human so the question doesn't apply, Quinn thought. But he said, "Guess not. Me neither. But they got good rent control there. . . . How'd we get in here anyway?"

"With a headache. That's all I know."

"I don't even know if I'm awake. Or if this place is—"

"It's not a hallucination. Even the thing you saw tonight, that wasn't hallucination. That was the Higher Reality of the object. You're not hallucinating. You're here. I'm here."

"How'd you know I saw—"

"Experience. I seen a lot of guys in that State, you know? Come down from visions."

Bullshit, Quinn thought.

The tramp rattled on, "The vision wore off in you, but it's the reason you're gonna work so well. It put your brain into the right frequency, for a while. Visions isn't just hallucinations, man. It shows you things. The Conceptual Dimension of a thing. And of things you don't even know're there."

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He's a loon, hasn't been taking his medication, Quinn thought. It's not *enough* drugs, that's why he's a Street Sleeper.

"So," Quinn said. "What do we do now?"

"We wait. You're in a waiting room, man."

"You know all about it, huh?" Quinn said. "Then explain this place to me." Thinking that the guy probably had it all wrong. But Quinn was scared. He wanted to hear someone talking.

"The Middle Man works for the Spirits, and the Fetish Broker works for the Middle Man. You got a cigarette?"

"Uh uh."

"Then I'll smoke one of my own." From some wen in his clothing he took a crooked, dirty cigarette and pushed its end into his tube lighter. The smoke smelled like real tobacco. He'd bummed somebody generous.

The tramp leaned back against the wall, blew smoke out through his nose and said, "The Middle Man is a Wetware Medium. He . . . how much do you want to know?"

"All of it, if I can get it."

"You'll be sorry you said that. . . . There's a subatomic particle called the IAMton. Physicists, they speculate about it, but the Middle Man *knows*. He was a cutting-edge hot shot at Stanford. He isolated the IAMton, and when he did, it spoke to him. Can you fade that? A subatomic particle that tells you, *Yeah! You found me!*" The street sleeper laughed. "Actually, see, it was *all the IAMtons on the fucking planet* that spoke to him, *through* the group of 'em he had contained in the tokomak field. Anyway, the Middle Man, now, he wants other people to know what the IAMton can give you, which is why he lets people tell about it like this, because he wants other people to use the knowledge—to find their own way to use it—but so far no one has. And he lost the way to it, once he was there. It's like biting your own teeth or licking your own tongue, once you're there . . . so now he can't tell anybody how he got there." He took a drag, coughed, blew smoke. "The IAMton, now, it's a subatomic particle that's present any time there's awareness. The body is electric, right? Has its own electromagnetic field, right? This IAMton, it's a ubiquitous particle and when an organism has the right sort of magnetic field some of these particles—more for the higher organisms—are attracted and incorporated into the organism's seat of holographic consciousness. Into the brain. It's the *I*, the thing that reacts beyond reflex. Now when a tribe of people are in psychological alignment they generate an external collective electromagnetic field—"

"What were you before you were a Street Sleeper?"

"Don't interrupt. Anyway—"

"I mean, you're talking different now—"

"You want to know about the Middle Man or not?"

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Shaken for new reasons, Quinn said, "Go ahead."

"Anyway, this tribal field generates entities, or attracts entities—the Middle Man is still not sure which it is—and the entities appear to us as expressions of our consensual interpretation of our environment. Now your primitive Shaman, your aborigine, sometimes he can talk to them and get results and sometimes not. These entities aren't really very powerful and a lot of the time they can't do anyone any good, except that they can teach you about things, like tell you what plants are medicinal . . . but in a big civilization, these entities are a little stronger. Especially now that the Middle Man has made some solid contacts, and they're more a part of our world, they're less ephemeral than—Are you listening?"

Staring at the tramp, Quinn had seen him flicker. "You're part of the HopeScope. Some kind of . . . image."

"So? I had to check you out, didn't I? I mean, you're so fucking ridiculous, you and your friends . . . getting P.O.'d and walking around with a fantasy about cracking the Fridge. And you, considering your old man's Dizzy Doseout. Progeny of a popstar gotta be a flake. Spoiled little rich kid. In short: What a bunch of jerk-offs. I had to see how serious you were. Engaged your top mind so I could look in the lower mind . . ."

"You're reading my mind?"

"No, you're exhibiting some of it to me. We're not really here, you understand. You're lying on a table under the old bank."

"Shit!"

"If you say so. You're hooked in, socketed with the DataBase that the Middle Man uses to talk to the Spirits."

"Bowler doesn't buy the Spirit part. He says you've just got good hackers."

"He's a left-brained Stalinist ignoramus."

"Look—"

"You want to know what we want from you in return for opening the Fridge. If it was anybody but Deirdre, or if you didn't have the key—which you can bet your ass isn't enough by itself—we'd tell you to cruise on. There's a thousand people who want to get somebody out of the Fridge. That's *hard*. But it's Deirdre, and that's part of the reason. The other reason is our usual fee, which is worship. I mean real worship, I don't mean ego pumping."

"You want us to worship the, uh, Spirits?"

Another flicker, and then the street sleeper wasn't exactly there anymore. The guy had gone two-dimensional, was a geometrically emblematic figure on a screen, like a product insignia. Quinn was sunken into a sweet numbness, from within which he could hear the emblem talk, could see the hieroglyphic's mouth move, knowing he was seeing this on

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the back of his closed eyelids . . . while the Middle Man, the transformed tramp, said:

"It's a sweet thing, Quinn, our worship. It's not submission, not really: it's vanity. They're us. It's a rush, Quinn. To sing of them, and bleed a little for them, and give them offerings, and ergs.

"I'm talking Floures, who exhales electrons.

"I'm talking Network and Grid, the messengers of the gods, one for back and the other for forth, sexing with their mistress Wavelength.

"I'm talking TeeVee the Belly-stroker, who eats everything and consumes nothing, the Buddha who lies.

"I'm talking One-Oh-One—of whom you, Quinn, are a halfling—the Spirit whose sword is Input and whose shield is Output, whose recollections are the ice-melt flowing between the arid banks of every computer online.

"I'm talking Pixel, the video queen—your mother, Quinn—who awaits you in the on-screen demimonde.

"I'm talking Fractal, the living gateway to the Fifth Dimension, whom you met in a lamp post and a drainpipe, who unites the dimension of the human senses with the dimension perceived by the electronic.

"I'm talking Pharmus-Hormona, whose translucent flesh swells voluptuously or shrinks to sinewy sweetness; who has made Fertility and Fashion indistinguishable.

"I'm talking MaxBux, the energy that is money, the money that is energy, the living flow chart of ease and power.

"I'm talking Score, Lord of the Stash, Mister Gooddrugs, whose teeth are needles; plead, beg to be sacrificed to him, beg him to take your throat in his jaws.

"I'm talking Androgyna the Disco Queen, who is the shortcut to the Spirits, who is the hip-hop voodoo and the Womb of the Urban Primitive.

"I'm talking Vehicle, on whose crown is the Mack Bulldog and in whose heart is the GM slogan.

"I'm talking Court, the Liar, the speaker with two tongues, both of them brown.

"I'm talking Bust, the Cop, the Destroyer, whose face is chrome stamped with all numbers, and whose arms end in a gun and a stunstick; Bust, to whom sacrifices must be made, and if you're wise you'll pray humbly to the Spirits that he is satiated with your enemies . . .

"I'm talking relatives, Quinn. Because sometimes Zeus becomes az swan . . ."

"I'm scared."

"You're okay. When One-Oh-One took control of you to talk to the Mufti in Arabic—"

"Yeah—what *was* that?"

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"*That* was One-Oh-One, using your tongue to talk to Jabbar, in Arabic taken from its linguistics database, tapping heavily on its rhetoric database and my own contribution . . . what matters is, afterwards you were a little shaken up. But you were okay, you were remarkably all right, considering. That means you're suited for this. So have confidence, Quinn. You've found your wavelength."

"But I don't know how to use it if I've got it—"

"I do. I'll guide you. Now: Let's see if the Fridge is crackable. It has a kind of unseeable Spirit of its own protecting it, Quinn, and it is Terrible."

"I'm—"

A circuit closed.

Quinn watched with the Middle Man's eyes. They were eyes that seemed to float over a scene, unwatched themselves. They might have been electronic, they might have been human, they might have been both. They were . . . apart from Quinn. Who was still locked away under the bank, on a table, heavily into R.E.M.s.

Still, Quinn watched as the tramp appeared in the ruins to Cisco and Zizz and Bowler, manifesting in the air above them, a holy wino, a levitated tramp with an aureole the color of a monitor screen's glow in a dark room. Bowler shrank away, and turned his back on the apparition, shaking his head. The vision spoke to Cisco and Zizz. It fluttered its silver metal-flake wings, and drew on an ethereal cigarette; it blew a smoke ring that shaped itself into a swastika. It blew a stream that shattered the swastika and, with suave detachment, said: "There is an old pornography theatre in the next block south. The place is derelict now, and looks blocked off, but climb over the rubble and you'll see the way in. The Fetish Broker is there. She will equip you." The voice had just the faintest telltale of electronic filtering.

The apparition faded, the details first and then the outline, the way projected holos do. But Cisco and Zizz never doubted it. "Meet you back *heee*-errre, Bowler," Zizz said, "since you're gonna be a *butt*-hole about it." And went to meet the Fetish Broker. Bowler waited behind, alone in the ruins, unarmed, sulking in a fog of ideology. Running a risk: alone out here he was a victim waiting for the victimizer, unless he got lucky.

On the next block, Cisco and Zizz clambered over fallen masonry and into the shattered Adult Sensurround Theatre across the rubbled street, and there met the Broker.

The Broker was lying in a bed of smut.

The photographic imagery on the twentieth century porn magazines had been transferred onto pseudoskin—High Silk, the expensive brand—so

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that she lounged on a wallowy pillow configured with hundreds of small, interlocked nudes, a cloth-print pattern of languid faces, of canted buttocks and flowing breasts and the intersection of genitalia. She was wearing an alumitech spine: a long grey metal millipede down her naked back, a millipede equipped with implant wires instead of legs. It was a signal transformer for the nerve-ends, hyping impulses from the erogenous receptors, from every sort of pleasure-sensitive nerve. It was state-of-the art, but it was a new art, and her movements were sometimes erratic, when incoming somatic pleasure signals interfered with motor-coordination transmissions. A porcelain mechanism beside the bed blew warm, therapeutic mists onto her, jets that strategically probed her enhanced erogenous receptors; the pillow undulated slowly beneath her, its hidden servos massaging, falling slack, massaging again . . .

The Fetish Broker was sunken-eyed, dagger-haired, and almost skeletal-skinny. A tattoo of prettied-up nervous system lines, embroidered with curlicues and fleur de lis and blossoming vines, was etched across her torso and legs in sullen colors. Watching from another place, Quinn saw the flesh-colored plastic box of the drug-doler implanted into her calf.

Zizz noticed it too. "Ooooh, a doler, those are 'spensive, what you got innit, what'sa dosage?" Zizz and Cisco stood before the Broker's bed like courtiers at a royal audience.

"That's a rude question," the Broker said. Voice like an annoyed Siamese cat. "People don't ask people that."

Quinn assumed she was getting low doses of amphetamines trickled out to her, cut with maybe demerol, the occasional wash of Beta-Endorphins.

The room was a concrete cave, with its edges lost in red shadow, and the Broker's electronic fetishes its stalactites.

Cisco was staring up in fascination at them. They hung from the ceiling, hundreds of them, each about six inches long. Made with tiny pliers and tweezers and probably with the Broker's teeth, sculpted intricately from color-coded wires, bandsaw-cut pieces of circuit board, microprocessors, semiconductors, condensors, and . . . bone. Hanks of hair. Strips of blue velvet, green satin. All of it twined into little almost-people, and shapes suggesting animals no one had ever seen. None of the figures were definite, but all were clearly defined.

The Fetish Broker grinned, lips skinning from teeth that showed the tops of their roots around receding blue gums.

On a soder-spattered wooden worktable next to the bed, four fetishes were strung together on a black wire. They were figures of brightly colored rubber and copper and alloy. She moved a hand toward the table and it looked like she was moving it through strobeflashes. Jerk-jerk-

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jerk. Annoyed, she reached behind her with her other hand and made an adjustment on her spine. The hand moved more fluidly and picked up the ring of fetishes. "For you, Middle Man says, for Deirdre."

Cisco reached for the hoop, and tugged on it—but the Broker wouldn't let go of it. Her lips skinned back from her death's head teeth again.

"A price." She moved jerkily into a robotic parody of a seductive pose. "He says I can't charge bux this time. But I can ask for something else." She looked at Cisco's crotch. "You, for a while. The other can watch."

Cisco swallowed, visibly. Muttered, "Bowler's getting off easy."

The Broker put a new tube in her doler, and lay back on the bed. She spread her legs, and said, "Don't waste time."

They had to wait for the Broker to finish with Cisco.

"She's a pain in the ass," the Middle Man said. "She's going to throw off my timing if she takes too long."

Quinn couldn't see himself, or the Middle Man. He saw Cisco and the Fetish Broker on the bed, from some objective non-place. But he and the Middle Man could hear each other.

"Hey," Quinn said. "How do the fetishes work? I mean, are they just a psychological trick or—"

"They're attuned to an IAMton transmission, and channel it. What matters is *why* they work, Quinn. The human world has reached a psychological critical mass. In the last part of the twentieth century people were panicking for a sense of community, belonging. They felt inconsequential in the bigger community—and for most people the smaller ones around them were filled with strangers. Their families were falling apart, and their tribes were bogus. They needed *real* tribes, Quinn. We all need them, particularly under stress. Which is why things factioned so brutally in Beirut. And in New York. And it's why the fetishes work: because we're pulling back into tribes; tribes with powerful consensual beliefs. And *our* tribe is strong in this town, Quinn . . ."

The Fridge looked like an office building.

"Why should prisons be ugly if the new technology can make them internally secure?" the designers had asked, thinking themselves stunningly innovative. Why not make them so that the locals would be less likely to object to having them nearby?

Out-of-towners seeing the Federal Control Penitentiary, rising austere but unthreatening from the artificial island that forked the Hudson, took it for the headquarters of a security conscious multinational corporation.

But when you saw it from Shacktown, it looked different. Shacktown was the towering personification of the housing crisis: The roof-slums, the intricate maze of fiberboard shacks precariously piled on tenement

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roofs, warehouse roofs, any open space they could stake out, up above. From up there, they could see the Fridge's octagonal polarized-glass skyscraper, and know it for a prison. A seventy-story prison without roving spotlights, without outer containment walls or electric antipersonnel wire. It had a stylish notch up one side and sprawling green lawns and a topiary garden and floodlit fountain. The Shacktowners knew what it was, though. It made them shiver because it was so *confident.*

But it was guarded, all right.

As Cisco and Zizz climbed out of the boat, up the concrete embankment, and onto the lawn—they stopped, hearing the hover-cams approaching through the darkness.

Quinn, watching and listening through the Middle Man's own remote, heard it too. The Middle Man switched to infra-red scan, and Quinn saw them, two abstracted birdshapes glowing red with their motor heat as they hovered on either side of Cisco and Zizz, thirty feet up, evaluating them. Alerting the cyberguards in their niches around the base of the building.

"That's it," Quinn told the Middle Man. He couldn't see the Middle Man, but he was *There.* He was the unseen background. "The last time someone tried to break somebody out of there, the cyberguards came down on 'em, was twenty of those little fuckers rolling up all at once, blazing away. There was choppers, everything—all in about one minute. They're screwed."

"Not if we intervene."

"We don't have time."

"We do. You and I are talking in dreamtime now. Braintime, which is anything you want it to be. You ever have a dream where everything that happens takes days and days—only when you wake the whole dream took place in three minutes? It's like that. We're ten times faster. Twenty. Thirty. Okay?"

BAM BAM BAM Buh-BAM

"I hear music," Quinn said. "A hip-hop beat."

BAM BAM BAM Buh-BAM.

"I can't crack the Fridge alone, Quinn. That's why you're here. You have the talent to be empty. To be a channel. To be a zero in the right place. You and me channel the Spirits to intervene. To do that, you got to empty your mind. You got to . . . come on and DANCE."

"What?"

"DANCE!" A woman's voice now.

BAM BAM BAM buh-BAM

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"DANCE!" A twenty-first century Motown singer. "Come on and DANCE!" Chanted in the rhythmic pocket.

"Are you serious?"

The beat, a ubiquitous Linn-drum detonation, went on into infinity as she (for the moment, a she) sang

Come on and DANCE
Bam Bam Buh-BAM
your way to another place
Come on and DANCE
Bam Bam Buh-BAM
internalize space
Come on and—

The beat radiated out from the marrow of his bones. Its Linn drum was programmed in the genetic core of his cells.

Suddenly Quinn was in another place. Androgyna's womb, a mirror-walled Disco suffused in crystal blue; he was dancing with himself, one of the Broker's fetishes hanging around his neck on a cord, whipping with his movements, each movement sloughing off doubts, shedding: Why? What if? But they—?

There were neon strokes of light in the ceiling and he knew from their patterning that they were impulses firing through his neurons. That he was dancing in his own skull.

And his spinal cord radiated somatic impulses in the center of the ceiling: a split-laser, spitting streaks of laser light to the beat, and that was the campfire he danced around, in the dance of the urban primitive . . .

In the Amazon, in an *oca*, in a village of the Topajo, the *Feiticeiro* danced around a fire; the men of his tribe squatted around him, gifting him with rhythms. They twanged the *birinbal* and thumped hollow trunks. He was naked but for the sacred marks in green pigment, and the shining sheath of his sweat. The hut baked with the heat of the campfire, of bodies; the shaman was trembling like a leaf in a wind in the hot roar of a drug American medical shamans called Ibogaine, the powdering of a holy plant. The shaman danced in the groove, to the beat that radiated out from his marrow, programmed in the genetic core of him: that's what his body did. His mind had another body that eased through the World, the jungle, searching for the black jaguar, the bamboo blowgun in his right hand; humming deep in his throat to the distant plangency of the Birinbal as he called to the Spirits . . .

Quinn felt himself there physically, sweating, aching, short on breath,

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heart banging, but getting his groove, going into the trance that made it seem possible to dance forever, realizing that the gateway to the other continuum had a corridor and this corridor was the infinite dance; letting your own bodyheat melt you down and sweep you along, moving your hips into the pocket of the beat, completely lost in it. So the pain of exertion seemed far away, a distant smear of color. . . . And it seemed to him, as he danced (BAM BAM BAM buh-BAM) in place, in the suit of lights that was his perspiration, that he was on his way somewhere . . .

He touched the fetish at his neck. A circuit closed.

Something clicked.

There was an amoebic grid, a rubbery lattice of light, that rippled in three dimensions with sine waves. If you kind of squinted, it was man-shaped, too. It was forming around the fetish that Zizz had thrown on the ground, as the Fetish Broker had told her to.

Quinn felt the rippling lattice thing quiver in his hands. It was two things, two Spirits, and he felt them in his hands like there was a mild electric charge going through them. . . . That buzzing feeling . . .

Like the buzzing, the vibration he'd felt just after he'd inserted the card.

Now he had them in his hands like small animals that would respond to his will, trained pets, hungry and curious . . .

Go to the cameras.

The rippling grid stretched itself out, with hunger and interest, to the two hovering metal birdshapes—each with its camera-lens head—and seemed to split into an amoeba and drain into the lenses . . .

"Network and Grid, inseparable," the Middle Man said. "One thing going to two places at once."

(In some far place, Quinn was still dancing.)

Quinn saw a man looking at a bank of monitors. On one of them was a view of the lawn by the riverbank, where Zizz and Cisco had stood. But (PUSH IN on the monitor) they aren't Zizz and Cisco; through the intercession of the spirits Network and Grid, Zizz and Cisco are now two guards out for the evening patrol of the island. Normally no one would have to go patrol the island in person but what with the blackout riots in the city and all . . .

The two guards were at the front door and the man at the monitor, recognizing them (thought they were on break, must've decided to stay out longer than usual . . . what with the riots . . .), hit the keyboard sequence that opened the gate and let them in.

In the antechamber, the guard looked up to see Zizz and Cisco come in, and almost pissed his pants.

Network and Grid were in place. Quinn and the Middle Man, each

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dancing in his own skull, in shamanistic ecstasy, invoked Pharmus-Hormona, and MaxBux.

The guard at the TV monitors was named Krutzmeyer. He was stubby and he had a donkeyish face and bristly black hair on his knuckles. He was reaching for the alarm button when the spiky girl touched him with a little doll made out of wires.

Suddenly she wasn't there anymore. In her place was a sex-swollen thing from his fantasies, impossibly voluptuous. The sight of her was an electric shock. It was instant hard-on.

The feeling that rose up in Krutzmeyer was not sexual attraction. It was sexual consummation, ongoing. It was like being hit by a freight train made of soft, warm, sticky ladyflesh, and the train had hit him from the inside, had come charging out of the base of his skull down into his spine, down to the groin chakra and IMPACT. There was no resisting it.

(To Cisco it seemed that the guard looked at ordinary Zizz and—bafflingly—gave out a wail of ecstasy and monstrous fulfilment and fell onto the floor, convulsing.)

Krutzmeyer was watched by other guards on a second bank of monitors. One of these wanted to raise the alarm but Floures, of the Electrons, poured through him, holding him rigid, till Cisco figured out how to open the door into the second checkpoint. This guard's name was Wolfeton, he was sixty-two, emphysemic, and sick of his job, easy as it was. And when Floures could no longer hold him, when he saw the two weirdos walk in, and he reached for the alarm button . . .

Cisco touched him with a fetish.

For Wolfeton, Cisco was someone else. Cisco was Darrel "Ducky" Parks, grandson of Bert Parks and host of *Bux, Boy, Bux!!*, TV's most popular game show, routinely giving away $100,000NB a show. Transmuted from lead into gold by MaxBux, Cisco was the apotheosis of Easy Money and Instant Luxury, he was a ticket dispenser for a non-stop to that island in the Florida Keys Wolfeton had dreamed about, and with the money Darrel was transferring to his account Wolfeton could buy a place on the island—Hell, he could *buy the island!* And he and Gertie could . . . the hell with Gertie, he could afford a pricey divorce, he could dump Gertie and buy the best mistress bux could buy—hell, make it *three* mistresses, and while you're at it . . .

What happened to Wolfeton went beyond pushing his greed buttons. His rational mind would never have believed Ducky Parks had come here. MaxBux reached into the part of Wolfeton that yearned for infantile gratification. Something buried beneath the foundations of the personality; wired into the nervous system itself. Gratify that place, where a

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personality interfaces with a nervous system, and the rest of the mind will follow. MaxBux was quickfix; the Big Release; Mama and Papa in one. And Wolfeton had been waiting years for him.

To Zizz it looked like the guard was staring at Cisco and grinning a sort of rictus grin and hyperventilating, turning bright red . . . But nodding frantically, muttering "You goddit, Darrel, anything you say, Darrel—" as he punched the code to open the door to the control room.

She shrugged and went into the computer-control room.

Brandis Danville was anorexic, anal, and—in the words of his coworkers—"a suck-up." He thought of himself as "ambitious and diplomatic." He looked up and saw the strangest woman he'd ever seen walk unaccompanied into the control room. She wasn't even wearing an antidust suit to protect the computers. He reached for his console and she touched him with a faceless doll made of wires.

The girl wasn't there anymore; instead, a man in the uniform of the Federal Control High Command stood there, his eyes in mirror shades, his uniform crawling with braid and brass; he was *big*, and Brandis could no more defy him than a straw could stand up to a hurricane. He had five-hundred-mile-per-hour authority. For Zizz had been visually transfigured by Bust, the Destroyer. Bust, for whom even a fractional defiance means death.

Bust, The Compleat Officer, said, "Deirdre Beladonna Arliss, FP87041, in unit 4577BB, is to be released and remanded to me."

"Absolutely, right away." Not a thought of all the orders, the papers, the various failsafe checks and countersignings and video authorizations. Except one. "If you'll give me the key, sir. Keys are kept in FedControl Central and transmitted in emergency or—"

Zizz handed him the cassette.

"How did you get the image code?" the Middle Man asked a part of Quinn's mind.

"When she was locked in, her lawyer was there, he recorded it off a screen with a lapel cam. Fuzzy image, couldn't use it for the key, but I figured it out, video animated a dupe. Took me four months."

"You got an eye. You were born to it. Cause it's working."

Deirdre was entering the third part of the cycle. In that part, the voices ceased for a while, and the small electric shocks ceased, and the rehab computer held back on the nausea drug. Give her system a rest before the conditioning started again. She felt her arms and legs twitch in their restraints as the impulsers exercised her inside the capsule. Calendar pictures of idyllic countryside were flashed in front of her eyes for "psyche

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refreshment." She had the option of talking to the Friend, if she wanted. But the computer that was the Friend always gently steered her back to the subject of rehabilitation, and it could not be induced to break down or to do anything extraordinary, so she didn't talk to it anymore. She couldn't think about the Struggle, of course, not overtly, because the biomonitors knew what her body and bloodstream did when she thought about the work she'd undertaken before the incarceration. The little glandular hints, the involuntary reactions . . . and when it sensed those things, it punished her.

But she tried to think of something that would—

A ripping sound. A deep, sickening disorientation. A burst of light. Oh no, she thought, it's happened: I've gone crazy. The one thing she was afraid of.

She was hallucinating that the cyberguards were taking her out of the mesh, wrapping her in a rubber sheet, carrying her between them for a long whirring time. Her mind had snapped into a fantasy of escape, she decided, like *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*. She'd gone pathetically insane.

And when she heard Cisco's voice she was sure of it.

"It's going to be a long time before she's . . . before she's all right," Bowler said, his voice cracking. "I don't know if she'll ever be. But at least they haven't got her anymore."

It was dawn, and the smog-singed light washed everything dirty blue. They were in an alley between a warehouse and a subcontractor's superconductor plant, near the Brooklyn Bridge, waiting for the van that would take them out of Manhattan. Bowler was going to take Deirdre to a place in Maine, a house in the mountains where there were people learning how to use automatic weapons for something Bowler wouldn't talk about. "They're good people. We'll take care of her," is all he'd say.

They were all supposed to go with him.

Quinn felt hollow, detached, like everything was happening to someone else. Disorientation? Despair? He wasn't sure. But he knew he was wrenched.

He had come to himself walking down the street, with the Mufti and another Funs guerrilla he hadn't seen before; they were on either side of him, supporting him as if he were a drunk. And they'd laughed at him the way they'd laugh at a drunk. He'd looked around, and found the world dull, grey, bloodless. An enormous rock pit where humanity quarried mediocrity like gravel. He had lost the Spirits.

"We take you to your friends," the Mufti had said. "And so you should not be weeping."

But he had wept.

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Now, Deirdre was sitting on someone's grimy back steps, dosed on tranquilizers, holding her knees, swaying, now and then her head making a chicken-pecking motion, her tongue protruding, some kind of hideous motor twitch . . . Quinn looked away. He couldn't stand seeing her like that. The conditioning had broken something in her. Maybe not forever. But she was forever altered in Quinn's mind.

Everything was altered. Deirdre was no longer frozen in the Fridge, but she could not stay in New York. She had to run; her fight here was over. She could only run, and hide, and try to heal.

And Quinn could no longer believe in Bowler's revolution. Because in his trance he'd had a vision, he'd seen FedControl: the vast stainless steel matrix of it, binding them with economics into a societal "Fridge Unit," the macroscopic mother of the one that had held Deirdre. It was too big, now, too technologically coordinated, to fight with guns, with bombs.

The Middle Man had shown them how to fight it. It had to be fought on a plane that transcended technological superiority.

Cisco was chattering, "I mean, it was so *fantastic*, the guards just sort of turned into babbling idiots and I could, like, feel the spirit workin' through me—"

No, Quinn thought, it worked around you. At most used you to prop up the scarecrows.

There were other things he wanted to say to Cisco, and couldn't. Wanted to tell him that the only reason the manifestations took the form of spirits was because guys like Cisco could comprehend them no other way. That it was because there were a thousand million people using all of civilization's technology without understanding it; the children of the new illiteracy. Using electronics the way a Cro Magnon had used fire: assuming it was magic. Using computers as if they were mediums to the spirits. And so the IAMton field had given us back our own interpretation of the new wilderness, the technological wilderness . . .

Quinn wanted to tell him that he really didn't understand at all. That Spirit was real but it wasn't what he thought it was. But Quinn shrugged, and looked at Zizz.

She was different, too, he saw. She wasn't chattering, he hadn't seen her reach for her drugs. She wasn't looking at him through the subpersonalities she'd used for years. She was looking at him from the core of her . . .

"I was there, too," she said, suddenly.

"Where?"

"In the dancing place. Just watching. I felt . . . I was halfway in . . ."

Quinn nodded. She could make the connection, too.

"I don't think we should talk about it," Bowler said. "Generates mis-

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understandings. Struggle to align with the Necessity of focusing on issues the Masses can relate to. Mysticism is decadent, elitist."

"You're too predictable, Bowler," Quinn said. "And I got news for you. I'm not a fucking Communist."

The van was coming down the alley, jouncing with pot-holes and trash.

"I don't wanna go," Zizz said, looking at the van.

"You have to," Bowler said.

I'm supposed to go with them, Quinn thought.

"You aren't going," said a wet voice.

It was behind him. Quinn turned, took a shaky step back.

A mercurial thing, a balloon-face in silver. It was just inside a grime-caked, broken window, extending from something he couldn't see. From an empty light socket, probably. It spoke again, and its two-dimensional lips moved.

"You were made for us," it said. Its voice sounded synthetic, but not electronic. It was a mathematical model of a voice, made audible. "We let you come back to these others, so you could choose fairly. To let you choose without fear. Choose: Come home and learn."

Bowler was tugging on Quinn's wrist. "Come on," he said. "The van." He was careful to pretend he didn't see the thing.

"Bowler, look at this thing, this *means* something, man. Look and then tell me it's not—"

"I don't see your hallucinations. And I don't want to see any more holoprojections. Hypnosis, whatever they used, it worked—but it was tricks, man. Gimmicks. Mirrors and hidden compartments."

A shadow fell over them, then. They looked up, and saw something blotting out the sky over the alley, lowering itself massively between the buildings, only just fitting (or did Quinn see it compress itself to fit?), and Bowler ran to Deirdre, pulling her toward the van, shouting, "Feds! Come on, it's a bust, let's *go!*"

But Quinn shook his head. "It's not a bust. It's from the Middle Man." He knew it, looking at the thing. A kind of mechanistic semiotics informed him. The vehicle's identity spelled out in dancing chrome and glass; its heraldic styling.

None of them made the thing out clearly. It had a style, but its specific lineaments seemed to shift. Was it a sphere? A saucer, a teardrop, a swept-wing jet? It was constantly redefining itself like an animation drawn with a shaky hand. Quinn had an impression of the design essence of the sleekest helicopters; the design symmetry of a Japanese Magnetic Induction train; the design elegance of the new, slim orbital shuttles; the design compactness and *attitude* of an Italian sports-car. All these affects shifting, warring to assert themselves. Here was no vehicle: here was a Spirit, personifying vehicles. It settled onto the pavement between Quinn

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and Bowler. A section of the shimmering, nervous hull shimmered faster yet, and dissolved. A door yawned. An invitation.

Zizz said, "Quinn . . ." She took his arm. Quinn was amazed: her touch felt so good. It felt like a completion.

Shivering with relief, Quinn followed his instincts. He stepped into the vehicle, and went somewhere else.

And Zizz went with him. ●

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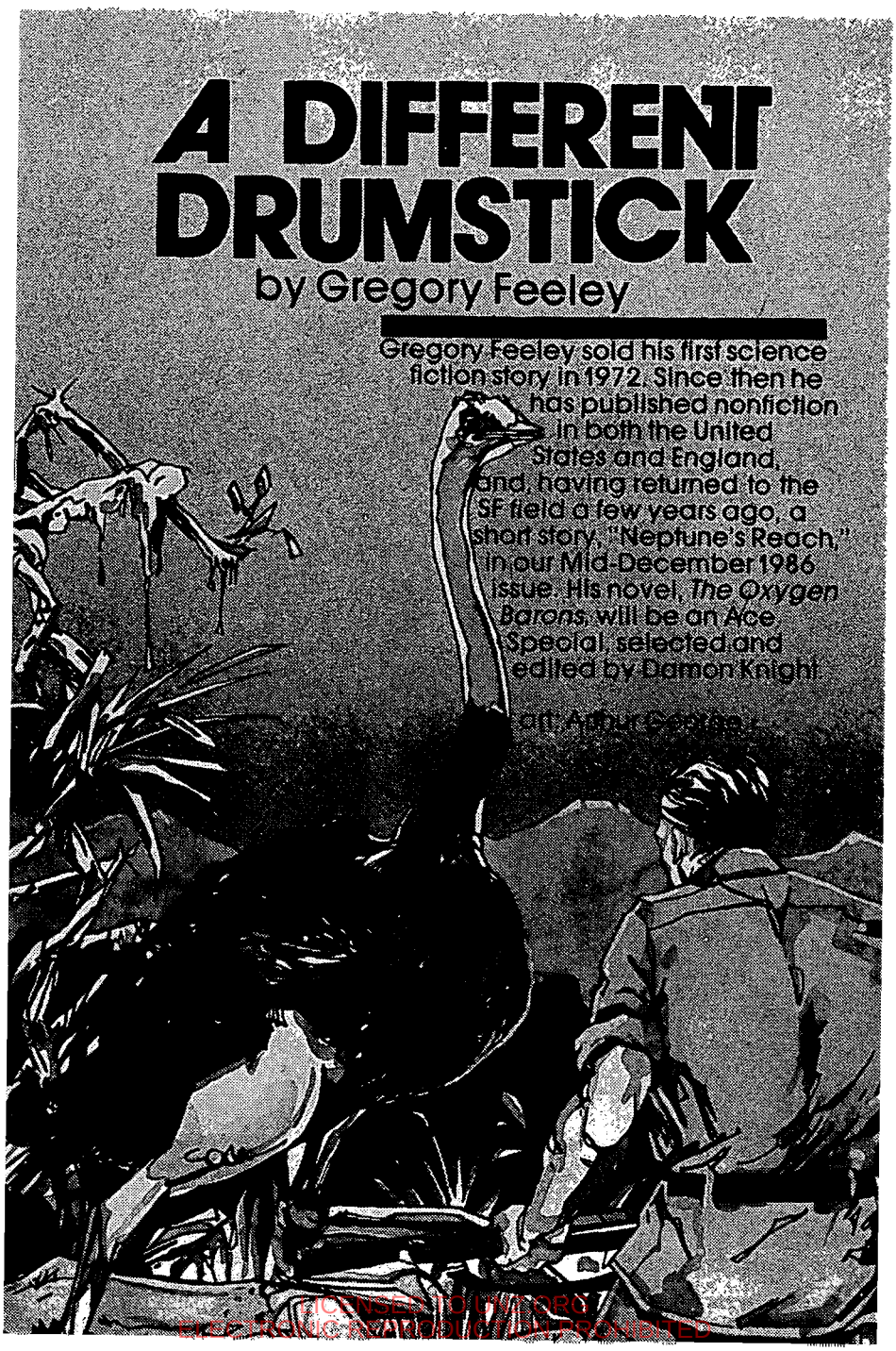
A DIFFERENT DRUMSTICK

by Gregory Feeley

Gregory Feeley sold his first science fiction story in 1972. Since then he has published nonfiction in both the United States and England, and, having returned to the SF field a few years ago, a short story, "Neptune's Reach," in our Mid-December 1986 issue. His novel, *The Oxygen Barons*, will be an Ace Special, selected and edited by Damon Knight.

art: Arthur Cobbe



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The moa reared her neck and looked straight at me, then rose on her powerful legs as though they were pistons. Cocking her tiny head, she stood straddling her nest as she studied me, as though recalling that my kind had exterminated hers once but could perhaps be prevented this time. I froze in my tracks, my gaze fixed not on the single egg but on those million dollar legs, which looked as though they could punch my heart out. Maori tradition held that moas kicked only when cornered, but I wasn't going to risk my life on six-hundred-year-old folk wisdom. The bird turned her head to scrutinize me with her other eye, a familiarly bird-like gesture that looked grotesque on that scale, and I decided to run like hell.

Behind me the path led down to a broad creek, deep enough to impede avian kung fu. The moa was staring at me like a charmed snake, the gentle S-curve of her tapering neck swaying slightly with the effort to focus downward. She was still trying to process my unfamiliar image in her pathetic brain when I cut and ran, kicking pebbles like spray. I could hear commotion behind me, more likely tumbling stones than the moa following my yellow tail, but I didn't check over my shoulder. One turn in the path and I was at the bank of the creek. The log spanning its width would have afforded sanctuary, but I just dove in.

Underwater all was peaceful and I slid along the shallow bottom like an otter, reflecting that if anyone had seen me I would have been compelled to do the decent thing and not come up. Crawdaddies, graceful creatures who have thrived since the Devonian without help from genetic resurrectionists like me and mine, scuttled over the dappled creek bed, startled by the splash. Some species do not need to be dragged from failure back into the hothouse of history. It is the unsuccessful designs that obsess us, I thought, and suddenly realized that my ruckus could have panicked the moa into a fatal accident. The thought deepened my funk to sheer despond, but my chest began burning for air, and I surfaced like the dog I was.

On the far shore the moa was sipping peaceably, long neck easily stretching past long legs to reach the surface. At once the naturalist, I hunkered in the water, vigilant to see whether the bird would go for any of the crawdaddies I had kicked up. Good West Virginia *orconectes* are not to be found in New Zealand riverbeds, but the moas had gobbled up the mollusks we had imported. This one seemed to be showing some interest, and eyed the shallows speculatively as she took a few steps out. Seeing my opportunity, I let myself drift twenty yards downstream, then slunk ashore while she continued to study New World cuisine. I was back at the nest within a minute.

Moas had few natural enemies before the arrival of Man, and seemed willing to leave their eggs for brief periods. Although the West Virginia

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foothills provided a better approximation of their New Zealand habitat than I would have guessed, I was sure the local weasels could break open a moa egg. The nest, a simple trough offering no attempt at concealment, contained one football-sized egg. I unslung my sample bag and rolled it in, amazed at its weight.

Noise on the trail. Mama Bird lumbering home: Who's been sleeping in my bed? In an access of inspiration I ran to the top of the trail; even an aggressor can't kick out at a figure occupying higher ground. This brainstorm vanished when I saw the bird *coming toward me*, nine feet tall and built like an ostrich on steroids.

My bowels jellied, but a scrap of professionalism held me from leaping, egg and all, into the nearest brush. The moa paused to regard me, her head almost level with mine, and I kicked a few rocks down toward her. Startled, she hopped backward a few feet, effortlessly as a thrush. No wonder the Combine wanted those legs.

A few steps sideways off the trail and I was safely in deep brush. The monster could bend down and peck at me, but lethal kicks were out. Moving fast, I reached the creek a prudent distance downstream, waded in without hesitation—my wet clothes were already plastered with leaves—and made for camp. The ugly Quonset hut provided for field staff beckoned like a pleasure dome.

Inside, Alan Gilley was cleaning a brace of birds on the lab bench. The kitchen facility for our outpost was no larger than a computer nook, but held a good microwave and a gas burner. Unfortunately the frozen foods filling the freezer were all products of our prodigal employer, moving the gut no less than the gorge finally to protest. If the turkey-sized Anomalopterygidea were not too large for the microwave we would probably have throttled one by now.

The game Gilley had bagged was plucked but not yet cleaned, and looked much like the mourning dove or Old World turtledove, only slightly larger.

"*E. migratorius*?" I asked him.

"P. pigeon," replied Gilley shortly. He dug out a pellet of buckshot with his knife tip. The birds, although still numbering only in the hundreds, were already flying in the dense flocks that had helped usher in their extinction. Nobody was firing cannons into their midst, and Gilley—a wretched shot—couldn't hope to wing a thing if he fired at the individual birds, but I must say the thought of him blasting into the first cloud of passenger pigeons to be returned to Earth rather put me off my feed.

"Net your own booty?" Gilley inquired politely, not looking up from his work.

I glanced at my sack, which I had negligently set on the table. In-

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spection through a strong light would usually determine whether an egg was fertile, but the present specimen would probably require a searchlight, and I wasn't actually concerned anyway. The yolk matter, fertilized or not, would be flown to our labs in the Midwest tomorrow, where the genetic material would be used to produce giant moas on a grand scale. As a food animal I much preferred the Anomalopterygidea, who could be grown on existing turkey farms without threatening the lives of the farmers. However, if our employers had not bought that fast-food franchise they would not be interested in those massive drumsticks and would never have resurrected the moa—nor, I reflected, hired me.

"It's in the bag," I said casually. I didn't bother telling him that the mother stood the full three meters that Dinornithidae can attain and gave some indications of defending her nest; Gilley sported a chronic nonchalance psychologists would call "lack of affect."

He continued with his cleaning. "Wonder what they taste like," he murmured.

"The eggs or the meat? Wait a year and you'll be able to pick up a crispy breast big as a shield off any turnpike."

"Chicken McMoa," he offered.

"Gawd." I watched him rinse the birds in the sink. Gilley was a naturalist, not a displaced academic, and had accepted early the prospect of spending much of his working life living in bunkhouses or worse. As yet unreconciled to the mortifications visited upon me, I chafed resentfully at my present lot.

"The labs will only be using the albuminous fluid," I said by way of friendly offer. "If you didn't mind the cholesterol, you could cook an enormous sunny-side up."

"Too late for that one," he observed, pointing with his knife.

I turned. The moa egg was radiating a network of jagged meridians from an off-center pole, from which a triangular chip had already fallen. As I watched, another fragment was punched out by the tip of a wet, questing beak.

I was not always as you find me here. As a doctoral candidate at Duke I dreamed of genetically engineered livestock for higher yields, lower mortality, better food for a hungry world. Agribusinesses who would profit hugely from such research endowed university studies, and the name of the Combine meant little more to me than a brand I had seen on my cereal boxes since childhood.

What happened seemed little more than a hiccup in an economy accustomed to low glides, but sufficed to knock the post-docs out of their trees like heavy fruit. I was one year beyond graduation, working on a project that was supposed to last three. The scramble for jobs in the

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private sector favored those with longer *vitae* than mine, and I fetched up somewhere in the Midwest, working for the largest food corporation in the history of Man. The job was entry level, appropriate for a smart kid just out of college. I thought I would move up soon.

The vast plains of the Midwest are better suited to agriculture than animal husbandry, but the Combine—nobody called the company by its name, as many employees remained nominally on the payrolls of wholly-owned subsidiaries—did conduct some research in breeding livestock, and I was kept busy.

Schiff had successfully cloned the dusky sparrow while I was in graduate school, the first instance of an extinct species being returned to the world, but since he worked from cryogenically preserved tissue the feat seemed unlikely to be repeated soon for more long-gone species. It was headline news when they finally reproduced the passenger pigeon, from entrails kept in formaldehyde for eighty years, but we all felt that the serious stuff, recovering genetic material from century-old stuffed specimens—let alone actual fossils—still lay a decade away.

I suppose it was serendipity that those first species had both been birds, for my thesis had been on the gene-lines of Rhode Island Reds, and the Combine's personnel datafiles had recorded my expertise in fowl. I had meanwhile suffered an enormous fiasco with my current project—we will not go into just what—and was whisked from the stockyards of Oklahoma to the home offices in Wisconsin as though plucked from the Burning Deck.

"But why a moa, sir?" I asked at the time. The project director who sat facing me frowned slightly—he had already heard "moa" when I had said *more*, and plainly took me for some Dixie chickenfarmer—so I elaborated. "The dodo would be much better publicity, and there are more plentiful and recent skeletons available."

He smiled, as though used to such naivete from research people. "The Consumer Relations department has concluded that the dodo is too firmly associated in the public mind with its homeland in the South Seas, and could never be accepted as American. Also, nobody would want to eat one. On the other hand, how many consumers know the *moa* is extinct?"

He had me there. I looked back at the papers he had given me. "I seem to remember there being two families of moa, one about the size of a dodo, the other huge. I assume we'll be resurrecting the smaller—"

"We are pursuing plans to rebreed several species of moa," he interrupted, "from both families. It might surprise you, Crabtree—" he bore down slightly on my good Texas name, as though it were funny "—but there are enormous profits to be made by the first company to produce a good breed of moa, and we mean to be that company."

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I couldn't understand why they were interested in the giant moa, and when he explained to me I didn't believe it.

The helicopter appeared while Gilley was dressing the pigeons. We both looked up as the sound swelled unmistakably over the hut's ribbed roofing, but Gilley's expression showed satisfaction rather than surprise. "In time for dinner," he said.

I ran outside. A bubble-domed Sikorsky was hovering thirty feet overhead, its tail drifting slowly as though to suggest uncertainty whether to land. Gilley appeared, holding down his hat against the noise and wind, and pointed toward the Quonset's southern exposure. The copter, in acknowledgment or inspiration, dipped and settled onto that clearing.

The Combine logo on the craft's side identified it as the milk run, due in tomorrow to fly my samples to Bluefield. I was looking for the equivalent of mailbags behind the seats, so wasn't minding the disembarking passenger. It was only when she stood blocking my view that I realized more surprises were in store. Our usual supplier was a courier named Glen, and he never showed up with a sleeping bag.

The pilot had meanwhile tossed several duffels onto the grass and was quickly back in the air, lest a prolonged din draw attention to our location. The woman, whose turned back had revealed only a mass of black curls spilling over her down jacket, now swung to face us. Gilley, who had ambled forward, essayed a kind of genial salute, but she strode up and gave the twit a hug.

"Hi!" she called to me over his shoulder, and I gave the same silly wave. She was perhaps thirty and wore a pair of sunglasses pushed above her brow, as befit someone just lowered to Earth. I did wonder how Gilley managed to attract such a knockout.

The undeserving Lothario at length brought her over to me. "Ann," he said, gesturing toward me with his usual grace, "this is Beefalo Bill."

I flinched, more pained than indignant at the betrayal. Ann giggled. "I've heard a lot about you," she said, smiling.

"I wish I could say the same," I offered gallantly as we shook hands, "but Alan has never allowed me that pleasure."

"Oh, well," Ann began, as though the gaucheries of Gilley needed no comment. Her swain thought at this point to introduce Ann Tolliver, another of the Combine's field people whom (he said, blushing) he had known from a few past excursions.

Under one arm, she was carrying her sleeping bag, which I offered to take for her. She surrendered it without demur, remarking, "I hope it's big enough for you."

More ominous signs followed as we settled in the hut. Ann dropped her rucksack beside my bunk, and as Alan poured drinks announced that

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the copter would be back to pick her up at 6:00 A.M. My samples would be flown from Bluefield right out to Wisconsin, but she would be staying in town, to await word on how the Combine found our work. She could, she remarked, be back next week.

Intimations of managerial displeasure I did not need. "Well, they will certainly be interested in *this* sample," I said heartily, steering Ms. Tolliver past the refrigerator to the cardboard box in the corner. The moa chick, exhausted by the effort of hatching, lay there in a disorganized heap. Its legs were longer than I had ever seen in a chick, and it would occasionally lever itself up onto them, only to collapse after a few steps.

"How darling!" she exclaimed. Then, "Are you *supposed* to be sending back live samples?"

"I'm not responsible if the birds find mates," I said irritably. "We've collected thirteen sterile eggs—" I rapped a knuckle against the refrigerator "—plus the fluid from this one. If they want segregated hens, they should have built coops."

Ann gave a don't-ask-me shrug and turned to accept a drink from Gilley. I downed mine with a dispatch that would have done my father proud.

The lovebirds huddled companionably over the counter while Gilley sliced mushrooms, occasionally urging a sip of the cooking wine upon each other. After lamely offering to pitch a lean-to that night, I sat pulling socks from my drawer, which I knew enough to wear three to a foot through the chilly evenings. Murmured endearments wafted inaudibly from their end of the hut, broken by conspiratorial giggles.

"Only undresses in the dark, so you can't see the tooth marks—"

I grabbed the bottle of hard stuff and slung the pack over one shoulder. Doubtless I could shoot my own dinner. If they looked up as I pushed out the back door, they didn't have the pleasure of seeing my expression.

Outside, a vapor trail stitched an otherwise perfect sky, still blue as the sun began its oblique decline to the west. I stood a moment in the knee-high grass breathing the warm air and willing tension to drain away. The fancy of jets overflying the walled garden of our restored antediluvians appealed to me, and I wandered across the fields, imagining the landscape dotted with ground sloths, mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, and someday even—who knows?—the dinosaurs the Sunday supplements tell us some oil sheik wants to rebreed, brought one by one back into the world as labs recover genetic material from progressively older fossils.

Coming into the open as I neared the stream, I stopped suddenly at the sight of the horizon, thinking for a moment I was seeing a campfire. The vapor trail, which a half mile back had seemed a smudge in the far distance, here touched earth—not beyond the horizon but just behind it,

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the expanding smoke now drifting through the tops of trees. I stood watching the dissolving column and thought: Not a high-flying, large jet but a lower, small one. After a few minutes I walked down the bank and waded across the stream, quietly.

I was pretty sure what I would find by the time I reached the clearing. A VTOL turbojet, engines swiveled to point skyward, sat peacefully in a meadow as though dropped from heaven. Neither the Combine's nor any competitor's name was on the fuselage, but I hadn't expected one. Industrial espionage is not a varsity rivalry. The jet must have followed the copter from Bluefield, keeping its distance, then caught up quickly when its quarry landed.

I approached the sleek craft warily, but it was plainly empty. The wasplike jet was no larger than a Piper Cub, its cockpit able to seat only one. I circled it from a good distance, alert for alarm systems. It occurred to me that another reason for employing a VTOL, rather than just a fast helicopter, would be its capacity for rapid getaway. The outsized turbojets on each wing would lift this thing like a rocket.

I retreated back into the wood, alive with company responsibility. If the pilot of this charger had been running around the preserve for the past hour, he had probably collected needlestick samples from every damn moa around, including the big and nasty ones.

"Stay where you are, Crabtree."

Even as I slowly turned an awful malaise came over me, for the familiar voice of Neville Granger, his reedy tenor undimmed by the passage of years, sufficed to steel me for his jumpsuited figure, goggles pushed up over his thinning brow, grimness and a smirk contesting for mastery of his callow features as he leveled some kind of weapon at me. As I took in the unchanged essence underlying the novel particulars, I felt as though the bad karma of my graduate years, like a skeleton emerging through the too transient flesh of happier memories, gaped horribly in some closet of my soul.

"What's that, Granger?" I asked him.

"It's a tranquilizer gun," he said mildly. "I'm surprised you don't recognize it. Right now it's on the setting adequate for a giant moa, and would give you a nasty overdose."

"No, the thing on your head."

"This?" He almost reached up to touch it. "Infrared goggles, strong enough to pick you out through the scrub. You've got less mass than one of the big birds but a warmer body temperature. I knew there was someone near the plane as soon as I crested the hill."

"Sounds like you're dressed for success," I said. Granger looked at me in faint reproach.

"You people are not the ones to profess pained indignation here. This

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compound bespeaks familiarity enough with the niceties of stealing information. —Not that you will be deprived of what we seek," he added, casuistic as always in self-justification, "nor is it properly yours in any legal sense."

"The lawyers will doubtless see about that," I snarled, more angry at Granger's puerility than on behalf of my employers. The lout was referring to the fact that the genes of an extinct species, falling as they do into the realm of natural law, cannot be patented. Created chimeras such as the Combine and others produced could be declared copyright—if easily pirated—but the only advantage attending the distinction of having resurrected a once-extant creature lay in the head start it afforded one in practical applications. Once the Combine had its information on moa mating habits and enough embryonic material, it would launch a major breeding program and attempt to corner the market in ten-foot fryers.

"Then we'll leave it to them," said Granger easily. He motioned me forward with his gun, and we began to move slowly away from the plane. "You don't even know whom I work for."

"Which is just as well, I suppose, otherwise you'd feel compelled to shoot me."

Granger clucked. He kept a prudent distance behind me, and while I could envision a movie hero diving into the brush while Granger fired futilely, I felt no desire to test his aim.

The sun had nearly vanished as we came out of the trees onto a low ridge, and the shadows of mountains had advanced across the canopy of woodland below us. I casually glanced downriver for signs of smoke from our wood stove.

"It's no use looking for your friend," Granger announced. "I've locked him into your bunkhouse."

"Did you," I said blandly, noting his use of the singular and wondering if anything could be made of it. Conceivably Ann or Gilley had been visiting the outhouse when Granger snuck up with his padlocks. More likely, of course, they had been surprised recreating the beast with two backs.

"I disabled the radio antenna as well," he said, reading my mind. "This operation *has* been thought through."

"You're quite the up-and-comer," I said, trying for a bitter tone to suggest defeatism and lull vigilance.

Granger smiled, looking easily about him. "Nice country," he remarked. "You know, I could have sworn I saw passenger pigeons a few hours ago."

"A project of my colleague's," I told him. "Occasionally we bag one for dinner."

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Granger seemed shocked. "That's pretty insensitive coming from someone of your background. There can't be more than a few hundred of those birds yet."

I shrugged, reluctant to cede Granger the moral high ground but knowing he had a point. "We've got one good flock," I said. "And it beats the company food."

Granger grinned at this. "I suppose they're testing new products on you?"

"Last month we tried out a new breakfast cereal called Nuts n' Roughage. White boxes with just the name on it. After ten days they sent us questionnaires."

"And what did you say?"

"I wrote that there are two apostrophes in '*n*'."

Granger clucked. "You just do not know how to work in a corporate environment. No wonder they've stuck you out in a trackless wilderness."

Not as trackless as you think, I retorted silently. I was hoping to lead him toward the edge of the preserve, where Company sensors might be tripped by our presence, but Granger seemed to know where he wanted to go. We were picking our way down the crumbly shale face of the ridge, making for the river's edge where Granger claimed he wanted to collect a few more eggs. Although some light would remain for hours into the midsummer evening, it was growing late for Granger to be dallying, and I was beginning to worry about his intentions.

Shapes moved indistinctly near a clearing below us, indistinguishable from swaying boughs if you did not know where to look. I waited until the wind was at my back.

"What was that sound?" Granger said suddenly. He stopped to listen, and I obediently halted.

"Below us?" I asked innocently. He could not have heard it clearly against the wind.

"I don't know. Didn't sound familiar."

This was understandable, since nobody living but me knew what the call of the male moa sounded like. After a minute Granger shrugged and gestured me forward. When I clambered over a low rise and gained some ground between Granger and myself I tried the call again.

By the time we reached the bank incipient twilight had gathered in the air, dulling one's ability to discern detail or scale. Granger was looking along the ground for nests while keeping one eye on me. I pretended to look, too, although I remained alert for motion out of the corner of my eye. Birds have excellent hearing, and the sound of our bipedal strutting would have interested a male even without those calls, which were territorial, provocative.

Granger was poking at some shells when the call came again, this

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time for real. It was louder and not really like my imitations, although they had apparently sufficed.

"What the hell was that?" Granger straightened with a jerk and brought up his gun. I was too frightened to decide how to answer, but was saved from that concern when a seven-footer trotted stiff-legged into sight.

Granger gasped something, but I wasn't listening. The creature, a monstrous outline in the dim light, was remarkably light on its great legs, and came to a stop as though on tiptoes. He stood fifteen feet away, neck bobbing as he sought our features, and could plainly catch either of us if he chose.

Looking at us, the moa seemed disinclined to pursue hostilities. Pugnacious against fellow males, they rarely attack other species. The bird regarded us briefly out of each eye and seemed about to turn away when, ashamed at betraying a fellow human to this creature, I squawked out the territorial challenge.

That did it. Throwing back its head in formal enmity, the bird came right at us. I threw myself to the ground, on the sudden inspiration that moas could do less damage trampling than kicking, and heard the *spang* of Granger's weapon. The moa shrieked. Looking up, I saw the creature, who may have been uncertain whom to charge, stagger for a second then go straight for Granger. Those dart guns immobilize in seconds but enrage at once. It is a tribute to Granger that, in the instant before the bird was on him, he realized that he could neither flee nor stop it, and instead fired his second round into me.

I thrashed and plucked the dart from my haunch, and so missed the expression with which Granger met his attacker. I scrambled up only in time to see the moment of impact, the long neck dart out like a serpent. Granger howled. Even as I dove into the underbrush, some lucid corner of my mind registered the fact that Neville Granger would be credited with discovering how rival moas fight. They peck.

I was rubbing my wound as I pushed through the foliage, trying to remember what I had seen of Granger's gun. He had spoken of settings, which I interpreted hopefully to mean that the dart had contained a bulky dose that hadn't all got into me. The thought of my body crashing to the ground to be found later by Granger was not pleasant. I knew his character enough to guess he would kick my ribs in.

Heavy footsteps sounded in front of me, swishing through foliage in the darkness. I froze, wondering in a panic whether Granger was before me, my directions muddled by narcosis. A tall figure loomed, and I felt an instant's deliverance, security men from the Combine arrived at last.

A great moa, slightly shorter than the first, stepped forward to study me in the dying light. The creature had evidently heard the battle cries,

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and came forward in the full flush of its young adulthood. A newly mature male, my height, it eyed me with belligerant stupidity, alert for further challenge.

I didn't breathe. If the young Turk was driven by tropism to peck at me until some cue told it I wasn't a moa, I would have to bear such blows quietly.

Perhaps five seconds passed, although with my bloodstream churning its cocktail of adrenaline and tranquilizer I felt I stood my ground an endless minute. Sounds of struggle reached us from the nearby shore, but I did not think to take advantage of Granger's evident preoccupation to make a noisy escape. The bird regarded me straight on, not turning its head to either side, and in my chemical extremis a vast understanding rose between us. On the periphery of battle, thrashings in the dark as the efficacy of a weapon determined the primacy between corporate predator and his evidently enraged prize, the young moa and I acknowledged each other gravely, fellow dinosaurs.

An instant later he was gone. Lightfooted even in darkness, the bird left me standing alone in the glade, reeling, bereft, and pursued.

A cold dawn broke shortly after five, which I greeted half-awake from my vantage in the crotch of a low tree. No sign of Granger stalking the fields with his gun drawn. I eased myself down gingerly, aching in every muscle and so addled in exhaustion I feared my steaming urine might be seen from a distance.

I had not returned to camp lest Granger await me there with his goggles and gun. More likely he had spent the night licking wounds in his cockpit, secure behind electronic fortifications and hoping I would creep into range so he could use the other toys they'd given him. Although every instinct told me to keep clear of that place as well, I worried that Granger would get the last of his samples and fly off at first light. I dimly imagined overpowering him in the vulnerable moment when he clambered to the ground, but by the time I ventured to peek through the foliage onto the clearing where the turbojet sat, it was empty.

The small flock of passenger pigeons flew swiftly overhead, intent on business of their own. Heavy dew soaked and chilled my pant legs, and I shivered, impatient for the brightening sun to warm the air. Slowly I crept toward the river, alert for signs of movement. One advantage over Granger that I did hold was that I knew where the moa nests lay, and that is where I found him.

What Granger was doing when I came upon him I will not say, save that he was compelled to take care of it before boarding his plane. Showing his human frailty more eloquently was usually beyond him, but even while seizing the chance to surprise him I was, if remotely, moved. Had

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I a weapon of my own I would have awaited a more decorous moment, but could not afford such niceties. Opportunistic as any microbe, I waited only for a particularly vulnerable moment to step forth and shove him aside.

The tranquilizer gun felt awkward in my hand, but I located the trigger and leveled the thing as Granger slowly stood.

"If you're going to shoot me, go ahead," he said, his voice quavering. "I'm allergic to the stuff and it will probably kill me."

"Don't be a jerk." I was looking at the sample carton at his feet, which was half-filled with fist-sized eggs. "Came back for the turkeys, did you?"

"They're the ones of real value," Granger said, bitterly it seemed. "Management was only interested in the big ones."

I would have nodded, but suspicion gripped me. "Empty your pockets," I said, gesturing toward the snapped pouches on the sides of his coveralls.

Moving cautiously lest he startle me, Granger pulled out a flashlight, his goggles, what looked like a pocket calculator, and a set of keys. Each he dropped carefully at arm's length save for the keys, which I took. "Time to rescue my colleagues," I told him. "Lock *you* in instead."

The sudden whine of a jet engine cut through the morning air. I looked up, wondering for a startled second whether it was their side or ours getting reinforcements, then realized with horror that the sound came not from the sky but from Granger's jet.

"You bastard!" I cried. I followed Granger's guilty gaze to the device dropped before me, not a calculator but some transmitter, which he had plainly activated while bringing it out. Granger looked back to me, fear not triumph on his face, expecting at last to be shot.

I threw the gun away and ran for the clearing, where the turbojet's autopilot was putting it through a rapid warm-up. Its roar gathered force as I pushed through the foliage, breaking through in time to see the cargo-laden craft lift gracefully from the churning meadow. The main engines swung down for forward flight while attitude jets held the plane at a steady ten feet, and then slowly it began to advance.

Granger appeared near the meadow's far edge, standing openmouthed as the beautiful craft leisurely gathered speed as though rolling down an invisible runway. It quickly gained sufficient altitude to clear the bordering trees, fuselage gleaming in the morning light.

I saw the flock from the corner of my eye, flitting between treetops at the edge of the field. I had time only to raise my hand before the plane passed over them. The roar of the turbojets coughed and choked abruptly, and a second later an engine exploded.

The plane tilted wildly and disappeared behind the trees, and a gout of flame erupted into the air, releasing a plume of oily smoke. The ground shuddered, and an enormous concussion broke over us.

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Granger was still standing motionless as I came up to him. The smell of burning gasoline rolled toward us on hot air, carrying with it the faint tang of roasted fowl.

I said, "The passenger pigeon is once more extinct in Appalachia."

Granger didn't reply. He was in shock, as doubtless was I. I pulled at his jacket, drawing him away from the summer foliage which was even now beginning to crackle, toward the river behind us, where moas were scurrying in alarm and electronic sensors alerted the worldly.

Granger began to wail. Squinting against the brightening light, I hauled my charge toward our respective fates down the river, mourning my ass and those of extinct birds everywhere. ●

"Thank God! Now maybe the rest of us will get a chance to publish something."

Cartoon by Mort Gerberg, © and reprinted from *Publishers Weekly*, 3/11/88.

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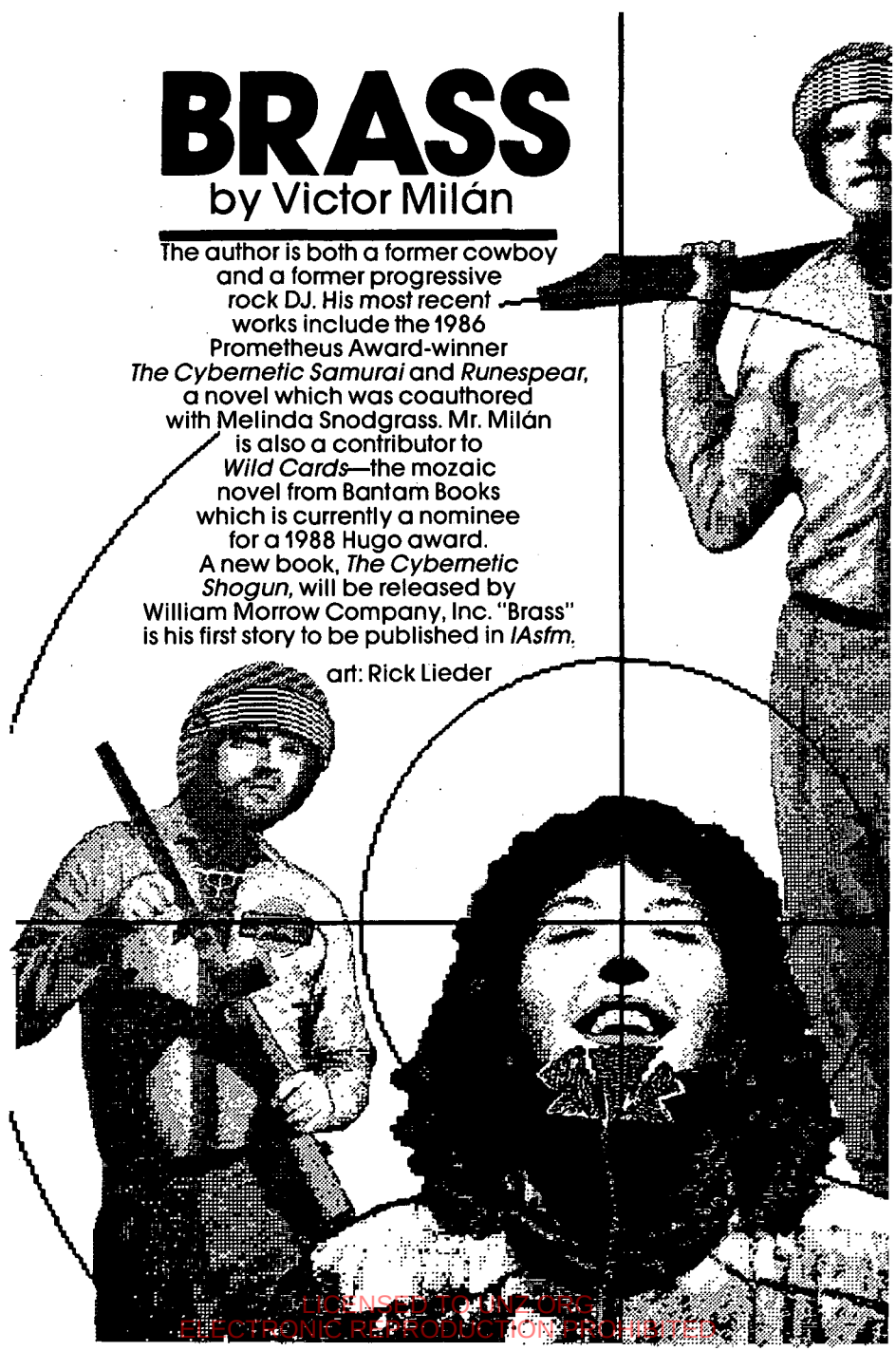
BRASS

by Victor Milán

The author is both a former cowboy and a former progressive rock DJ. His most recent works include the 1986 Prometheus Award-winner *The Cybernetic Samurai* and *Runespear*, a novel which was coauthored with Melinda Snodgrass. Mr. Milán is also a contributor to *Wild Cards*—the mozaic novel from Bantam Books which is currently a nominee for a 1988 Hugo award. A new book, *The Cybernetic Shogun*, will be released by William Morrow Company, Inc. "Brass" is his first story to be published in *IAsfm*.

art: Rick Lieder



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"It's a bitch," the trooper said, rubbing brief black hair.

"It certainly is," the man behind the desk agreed, nodding his neat blond beard into the open collar of his tunic. He had no idea what his visitor was talking about. He made it a policy to be agreeable to those who might do him good.

Somewhere a two-cylinder ethanol generator thumped like an amp with a bad prosthy. The trooper perched on the desk and probed a nostril with his little finger. He was thin as fiberoptic cable, his features oscilloscope sharp. Sunlight filtered through grey plastic turned his skin the color of stagnant water.

The large man suppressed his irritation. His guest had proven useful in the past. You just had to learn to deal with his foibles.

He pulled out a drawer and rummaged beneath a sheaf of hardcopy. "Here," he said, producing a bottle of *akvavit*. "Perhaps this will ease you while you tell me what's troubling you, Pavel Jovanovich."

The trooper accepted the opened bottle, rubbed its mouth with his palm, tipped it back, and swallowed. "Ah. That's better. I tell you, Hejmdal, it's no damned fair." He rocked back and forth as if he couldn't stand to keep still.

Hejmdal nodded. The hairs at the back of his neck stood up as a tank waddled past outside with a hiss of crushed gravel, brushing the tent with the skirts of its repellor field. A puff of cardamom-scented dust blew under the door. Hejmdal sneezed.

"Indeed," he said.

Pavel drank again. He kept ticking his upper torso to and fro. Hejmdal hated fidgeting. Just when he was reduced to thumbing his beard to keep his hands from strangling the trooper of their own accord, Pavel hawked and spat on the packed-earth floor and said, "It's no friggin' *fair* that we got to escort this brassbound bitch around this shitpot world."

Hejmdal's eyebrows rose. A quartermaster usually caught all the gossip. He'd heard nothing of this.

"Yes, yes? Go on. Drink some more, by all means."

"Thanks." Pavel's Adam's apple bobbed like a ball on a string. "It's all hushed up, you know. The Chairman's niece herself wants to tour a frontline world."

"But this planet's pacified."

Shrug. "Mopping up. Maybe they figure she can get to see the Engine of History blow down some autocs without risking her precious neck too much. All I know is good old Section Fifteen of the 2901st Mobile Rifle Battalion's getting it in the ass. Because of our 'glorious combat record.' That's what they're telling us, the pukes."

He spat again. Hejmdal scratched at his moustache to hide a smile. Many of Section Fifteen's exploits in rescuing the indigenous sophonts

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from capitalist exploitation had been fabricated on the very terminal sitting on the desk of Sgt. Hejmdal, grey eminence of the Fraternal Assistance Task Force's quartermaster corps, by none other than the soldier whose skinny butt was propped next to it. Pavel Oberg had talents you didn't generally expect in a line infantryman whose stylus neck no amount of abuse from the NCOs could keep clean.

"Where's the harm?" Hejmdal asked. "I'd think that was a soft billet, escorting such a prominent Servant of the People."

Oberg shook his head in disgust. "We're supposed to rotate back to Spacehead Prime in a Process week. We could be planting our probes and generally rolling in it back in this pigworld's capital. But no, we'll be stuck in it *here*, with the autocs sniping us the whole damned time! And the inspections—" His headshake took in his whole body. Inspections were Oberg's bane.

"Sad. Truly sad." Hejmdal reached a casual finger and tapped it on the nicked plastic housing of his QM terminal. "A person with your abilities might be able to do something about it—if he had *access*."

Oberg curled his tongue out and up and back to his upper lip. "You mean like the supplies we diverted from those fucking jailheads in CLD?"

Hejmdal's water-colored eyes flicked quickly around the tent. He swept it daily with the finest debugging equipment—strictly on the black, another fruit of Oberg's clandestine labors. But you couldn't be too damned careful. Unless you wanted to *be* one of the convicts serving under deferred death sentence in the Collective Landing Detachment. The thought made his flesh creep.

He manufactured a smile. "Just so. And, in fact, it may be that our comrades in the Detachment might just serve you in *this* instance, hmm?"

Oberg jittered in place and looked blanker than usual. Hejmdal poked his keyboard. "Look at this. A section from Regiment 523 of CLD is scheduled for R&R at just about the time the Chairman's niece is scheduled to visit." He shook his head and made clucking sounds. "Disgraceful, that such traitors should be lying in the sun and scratching their hairy balls while socialist heroes like Section Fifteen are shielding the distinguished person of our guest from reactionaries with their own shrinking flesh. *Unless*, of course—"

"What? Tell me, Hejmdal. Tell me."

"Unless someone made a few unauthorized changes to orders. Corrections, really. Then you could rotate back to Spacehead on schedule while obstructors of the Historical Process did the gruntwork."

Oberg licked his lips. "No good," he said reluctantly. "Admiral Sutin picked the One-Five of Twenty-nine Ought-One himself. He hates the Army. He should stuff a nova drive up his bum."

"He need never know." Hejmdal smiled. "A sufficiently skillful oper-

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ator might arrange that orders be cut detailing the CLD section to guard our visitor—but when she goes home, the record will reflect the sterling service of Section Fifteen in escorting her. Unless, of course, such a task is beyond your range—"

"No, no," Oberg said, almost falling off the desk in eagerness. "I can do it! You know that. Nothing I can't make a computer do. But won't, ahh—won't somebody *notice* that it's CLD guarding this cunt, and not us?"

"How much notice," Hejmdal said, leaning forward conspiratorially, "have you ever known High Servants to take of the proletarians it's their duty to serve?"

"Hanni. Fuck all."

Hejmdal settled back, flipping hands outward from his chest. "There. You see? The visitors will never notice the substitution."

Oberg's eyes bounced around their sockets a little bit, and he poked his nose some more. "But, I mean, *CLD?* If this Big Circuit's staff notices—"

"Dear boy, there are upwards of one hundred fighting formations in the Engine of History. Each has its own uniform. Do you think a niece of the Chairman herself—or anyone on her staff—is going to recognize the uniform of the Collective's penal units? The Detachment seldom features prominently in the simcasts, you know."

"Yeah," Oberg said, grinning. "Yeah. Hey!"

Hejmdal swiveled his terminal's glowing face to the trooper. Oberg reached for it. The sergeant slapped his hand away.

" 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,' " he quoted reverently. "We know *your* need. What remains to establish is what lies within your ability to do for *me*."

"I can lay my hands on some Zone," said Rudi. "The prime stuff. Put a glow all 'round everything."

Squinting into actinic sunlight that pounded the bare rammed earth of the forward starfield, the Poet tightened the muscles of his mouth by reflex. He knew he had an expressive face, and he didn't want to give anything away. Especially not the intensity of his interest. Zone was derived from the standard drug the Collective fed questionable units going in on assaults, to wire them up for combat. It made all colors bright, all sounds crisp as glass breaking, made you the hero of your own personal adventure sim.

Sometimes it even deadened the pain.

"So?" the Poet said sidelong. Up front, an officer as rigid and attenuate as a sensor mast, and, at least above the black rampart of his collar, hairless with a finality that seemed to preclude any possibility of hair

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anywhere *else* on his body, was reviewing the section with the new lieutenant, who was too inexperienced to hide how worried he was. "What of it?"

"So it's not easy to *get*, Comrade. But I know how." Since the Collective officially did not resort to such imperialist expedients as assault drugs for the troops, possession of an illegal derivative of what they didn't use was risky even for somebody already under sentence of death.

"Shut up, you assholes," hissed Stilicho. "You wanna get us all put on report?"

"Shut yourself," said Big Bori, standing behind Rudi, in a voice like an over-the-horizon barrage. "Or you want me to thump you, maybe?"

Rudi smirked back over his shoulder at the giant, then at Stilicho. He and Bori had an understanding, he wanted that clear. Stilicho ground his teeth, set his slab chin, and said nothing.

"How we know you ain't blowing out your ass?" asked Balt from beside Poet. He was squat as a prime mover, and had a well-earned reputation as the meanest bastard in the whole 10th Detachment. He was an honest-to-Process criminal, not Politically Unreliable like so many in the Section. A murderer, as it happened. He was Rudi's nearest rival as a trader on the black. At the moment he had an alliance with Poet.

"Who's online for medicinals?" asked Rudi, feigning pain. "Without me, we'd have Hanni for med supplies, or have you forgotten? Not to mention ammunition, or these chameleon suits we got."

Poet clicked his eyeballs forward as Section Sergeant Kyov yelled a command. "I'll think about it," he said out of the side of his face.

The section did a right-face and marched off toward the open-topped floats swaying slightly in the breeze, with a meter of daylight between their bellies and the rusty soil. The Staff Captain turned to Lieutenant Haakon Mir with an expression that gave the lieutenant a pulse of fear that they'd run out of viable waste-reducer bacteria at the jakes again. CLD was different from the Academy, that way.

"Really, Lieutenant," the Staff Captain said. "Your men appear most slovenly. Unsoldierlike."

"I'm sorry, sir. We've been at the front—"

"Halt. No more," the Staff Captain said. His skin was very white, with that sheeny Kosmos pallor. His mouth might have been cut into his face with a laser scalpel. "Excuses are not accepted. Have you forgotten whom you are dealing with?"

The Staff Captain shook his head. "I'd have thought to see more pride from the 2901st Mobile Rifles!"

Pivoting, the Staff Captain strode toward the floats, bootsoles making

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small crushing noises in the dirt. Haakon blinked. "Sir, wait. We're *not*—"

Haakon felt pain shoot through the heel of his right foot. He wheeled as the Staff Captain stilted on, ignoring him.

Sergeant Kyov stood right behind him, eyes downcast beneath grey-flecked ginger brows. Haakon felt outrage boil up inside him. "Section Sergeant Kyov, did you just step on my foot?"

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant."

Haakon stared at him. For a moment he couldn't speak. For an enlisted man even to touch an officer was unheard of, where he came from. And from the man's manner, it was apparent that Kyov had stepped on his foot quite deliberately. Why, anyone who'd dared to do such a thing, even when Mir was only a cadet, could expect—

Could expect, quite conceivably, to end *here*. In the Collective Landing Detachment. With twenty-year-old Haakon Mir and his fellow death-birds.

Indignation vanished, leaving ashes. "Why, Sergeant?" he asked softly.

"I beg the Comrade Lieutenant's pardon, but even for those in *our* position, perhaps it isn't healthy to contradict a Staff Captain, sir? Especially when he's chief of staff to the Chairman's niece."

"I thought she was her daughter." He shook his head. This whole assignment was beyond him. Who in Process' name had hatched the bright idea of detailing a *penal unit* to safeguard such an illustrious person, no matter who she was exactly?

He swallowed, hoping to moisten his throat with nonexistent spittle. It was just coming down to him, who'd lost everything, how much he had left to lose.

Head of the escort or not, Haakon wasn't privileged to ride in the second float with the great woman herself. First squad was in the point vehicle, in hopes the terrorists would blow them up instead of the brass. Squads Two and Three filled the last two cars of the procession. The celebrity herself rode in the second car with a driver from Mir's section and the skeletal Staff Captain. Haakon had barely glimpsed her when her aides escorted her from her unassuming shuttlecraft.

Haakon found himself in the third float with a Kosmos ensign his own age, who seemed to be some kind of liaison, and a driver from Second Squad named Dieter, who was mostly teeth. And ears.

"Ah, you don't know what it's like to be able to talk to someone my own age! All these responsibilities—" The ensign swept a gesture through the warm spicy breeze flowing over the windscreen. He had red hair and a wide, freckled face with a chin that came to a point. His skin was so pale it had almost a greenish cast in the light of the alien sun.

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Haakon smiled and made a noncommittal noise. He wasn't sure what his relationship to the ensign was, or was supposed to be.

The convoy followed a road lined with a windbreak of tall blue trees. At the side of the road, a gang of aliens were working to clear a culvert of black-veined undergrowth. As the convoy passed, they blinked huge sectioned eyes and waved three-fingered hands to keep the dust raised by the cars' repellor fields away from the purple spongy oxygen-absorptive tissue clumped on their emaciated chests.

"Are those natives back there?" the ensign asked, twisting his head to stare back at the laborers.

"Oh, no. They're Pre-Objectives from a labor battalion. Autocs are taller, heavier set. Built a bit like badgers. They have snouts and spiky fur."

" 'Autocs?' "

"Autocthons. The, uh, the natives."

"Ah. So tell me, what was it like, fighting to bring this world into line with Historical Process?"

Haakon shrugged. "The inhabitants aren't very high-tech. No modern weapons except small arms they take from our casualties, few heavy weapons of any sort. But they're incredibly tenacious. It's taken us a long time to subdue them. Even now we're not finished."

It all rang hollow, somehow, to speak so facilely of the pain, the mutilations, the unbelievable noise and bile-sour fear of combat. The men so recently met, lying staring at the sky with eyes like cheap glass beads. And they said he'd missed the worst of it.

"How odd, the way they fight so hard to protect the system that enslaves them. The exploiters are subtle and seductive, I suppose."

"They think of it as defending their homes," he said, staring off at a low blue-black ripple of hills. He didn't think as he said it, and instantly wished he hadn't, turning back with his cheeks red and burning as though from histamine release. It was nothing he would have thought to say before—well, *before*. Something he might once have reported someone else for saying. *Think what you still have to lose.*

But the ensign only sighed. "All glory to the Engine of History! I wish I could take part in the fight to bring progress to oppressed worlds. But I *do* serve, and it's not that easy a service, I can tell you. No matter what it looks like."

He glanced around. His teeth brushed his underlip. "But I suppose I'll see action today, won't I?"

Haakon looked down at his hands. Even with modern medical technology, they hadn't healed altogether straight, after the interrogators broke his fingers. Not as part of the questioning, they assured him; drugs and electronic scanning had told them all they needed to know. But such

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measures hadn't provided the proper suffering for a traitor. Or even a traitor's brother.

He was trying to hide his expression from the other, though he couldn't have said with certainty what kind of expression it was. He tasted ironic similarity to what he'd once felt in the ensign's wish. The longing to see action. It was incredible to him now.

"If things go as planned," Haakon said, words rasping a throat gone dry again. "That reminds me. Why does your, ah, superior travel with such a small retinue?"

"She always does it this way; everything must be done just so." He tossed Haakon a wink that implied shared knowledge of matters not even the lieutenant's relatively privileged background gave him an inkling of. "It's the usual reason. Security. Also, She dislikes ceremony, dislikes fuss. Dislikes it a lot. She's really a very modest person, you understand."

"I see." He didn't, exactly, but then, what he'd *really* wanted to ask was why the Chairman's niece would choose to be escorted by CLD. But he didn't dare.

The ensign slapped the float's plastic flank. "I see you have the latest model contragrav transport. Red Future Model 1000s, yes? Marvelous machines!" He grinned, looking five years younger. "Nothing but the best for our fighting men, eh?"

For some reason Haakon glanced at the rearview mirror mounted at the windscreen's top. Dieter's eyes were there. They found his and rolled.

Except when they were in action, Detachment's supply allotments were nowhere near adequate, and the landers never received half what was slugged for them. In combat, they got more weapons and ammunition, but never enough. Simply to survive, the Detachment had to send out foragers to steal or barter for supplies—acts Haakon had been raised to consider one and the same.

The regimental transport officer had refused to discuss where he had come up with the floats. "You don't want to know, Comrade Lieutenant. You don't even want to speculate." And even in his brief service in CLD, Haakon had seen enough to see the wisdom there.

"Indeed," Haakon said. "Nothing but the best."

"Herself—that's what we call Her, you understand, just between you and me and the bulkheads—Herself is obviously being groomed for great things. Now, some people say that's *privilege*, do you believe it?"

Haakon shook his head. He was finding the ensign supercilious and a bit shallow, and he had an uneasy feeling that he hadn't been so different himself, as a pampered cadet at the Academy. Still, the youngster was better company than the Staff Captain would have been.

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"Of course, you see, She was born and bred, as it were, to serve the proletariat and the Historical Process. Her genes belong to history—to all of us, in a sense. You see?"

"Comrade Lieutenant," Dieter said softly.

The land opened out around them into fields stretched like hammocks between low ridges lined with trees. Wild flowers splashed red and blue along the right-of-way. Haakon looked at them as if unsure what they were. He was a country boy of sorts, from an agro world, though most of his life had been spent in the urbs in orbit above it. But flowers made no sense to him anymore; they were just visual noise.

The line of floats waddled to a stop. Thin blue windbreak trees crowded the road to the left. Haakon kept glancing at them with the instinctive wariness of a veteran of five hard weeks, while his companion chattered on about the exhausting life of a high-ranked Servant of the People. They didn't afford much cover, those trees, but like all the regiment's survivors, he knew the autocs didn't need much.

Company was deployed in a perimeter around a field of mauve near-grain, neat rows of plants that waved wispy, brushy tops in a breeze that would never smell entirely right to anyone with human genes. Haakon had tried to find out when harvest time came, but nobody in the CLD contingent seemed to know. Nobody cared, to tell the truth.

Kyov shouted Section out of its vehicles. They trotted forward obediently, visors down, weapons ready, brown and grey patterns drifting lazily across their chameleon suits like scan lines on a flatvid screen. Helmet under one arm, Haakon wandered with the redheaded ensign toward the second vehicle. He wasn't really sure what his role was in this road show. At least he could trust Kyov to do whatever was necessary with the men.

Fifty meters from the road lay a scatter of low buildings shaped like half cylinders, made of a corrugated metal that sent the UV-rich sunlight flying like daggers at the eyes. The buildings were riddled like diseased tissue with bullet holes and oval pulse-gun burns. Tattered polymer-sheet remnants of a greenhouse flapped from a weathered wooden framework affixed to the largest structure.

A man of medium height wearing a black beret and midnight Kosmos tunic rolled toward them from the farm buildings with the gait of a big-bellied man. Haakon's lips tightened. Kosmos were such *toadies*. Here he and his men were in their patched, glitchy, clandestine chammies, and this fool was tricked out in full dress. In a *combat zone!* Whom did he think he was snaking?

Self-consciousness flooded him: *you're thinking like a common lander.* He glanced sideways, as if his mental lapse might have drawn notice.

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But the ensign just nodded, and the Kosmos Staff Captain allowed himself a smile at the newcomer.

"Haven't got a fucking clue, do they?" murmured Dieter behind him.

Haakon turned his head as far as he could without calling attention to the act and threw the lander a warning scowl.

Dieter grinned.

The Staff Captain extended a hand, and the personage Herself stepped down to the roadbed. She was the same height as the Kosmos ground observer toiling up the slow slope toward them, and about the same build, though broader in the shoulders. Her features were wide and large-pored. A hint of moustache shadowed her upper lip. Her eyes showed folds at the inner corners, sure sign of membership in the most exclusive circle of Servants of the People. Haakon thought he could make out a resemblance to the familiar face of the Chairman, who was known to refuse to use computer enhancement to improve her broadcast image—a lack of vanity rare in Chairmen of either sex.

She saw him looking at her and nodded gravely. Haakon blinked, saluted. The Staff Captain scowled at him. *Careful, careful,* he told himself. What could the protocols for this be?

With typical Kosmos arrogance—or with foreknowledge of proper procedure, given the service branch of the Servant's chief aide—the stout liaison officer trudged up, sketched a salute, and launched right in.

"Good afternoon. I am Commander Kammerer. You have come at a propitious time."

The Servant regarded him as a frog might regard a fly and said nothing.

"Several indigenous bandits are at this very moment hiding in these fields." He swept a black-clad arm around at the nodding plants to remove any doubt as to which field he was talking about. "As your Servitude will no doubt observe, this terrain affords splendid cover. Were our friends in the Infantry compelled to rely on their own devices, they might have a very narrow time of it indeed."

As he said the word *infantry,* his small black eyes raked Haakon. He had to know damn well they were Detachment deathbirds, not Infantry. But the Collective Landing Detachment was like farts; you didn't talk about them in front of important people.

"But help, Servant, is on the way!" He made another grand gesture, this one at the clouds piled like uncooked dough across the eastern end of the sky. "At this very moment, a very special delivery is inbound from the cruiser *Brecht,* in orbit above our heads. Now, if you would be so kind as to don these helmets, we will prepare for our demonstration of the firepower of the Kosmos Force of the Engine of History!"

Black-uniformed ratings distributed full-head helmets to the brass. Kammerer chivvied the Section onto their bellies by the roadside. For

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Herself and entourage, the Kosmos boys set up folding chairs beneath a hemispherical grav-tension screen. No groveling in the ditch for an important Servant of the People.

They waited. To his horror, Haakon realized that the two landers nearest him were calmly discussing some kind of drug deal. He glared at them. One of them—Poet, was all he was ever called—returned a blue-grey look that managed to be bland and menacing at the same time. Poet had little use for officers.

The dignitary began to shift her weight in her chair. She said something to her aide, who in turn said something to Kammerer. Kammerer moved his lips and gestured a lot, but Haakon heard nothing. The field didn't allow sound to pass.

A petty officer with a microphone boom curled in front of his mouth like an insect leg gestured suddenly to Kammerer. "Sixty second warning," boomed from a loudspeaker at his belt. "Seek cover." Then he scurried to the ditch to follow his own advice.

Poet and his friend continued to discuss the availability of Zone. Suddenly Rudi clutched Poet's sleeve and pointed. Poet barely deigned to look, but Haakon craned his neck in unabashed interest.

A shard of brightness among the clouds, and then it was upon them, swooping low, a rounded delta lifting-body shape, shitting a fan of plastic spheres over the field.

The drone cracked by, riding its hypersonic shockwave. Knowing what came next, Haakon pressed his face into the earth as the globes began to burst like soap bubbles. A smell of soil, alien yet fertile, filtered in beneath the edge of his visor.

The noise of the explosion seemed to envelope him. A great hot overpressure hand mashed him down into the dirt.

He raised his head to Instant Desolation. The ripening field was gone, leaving a vastness of bare grey-brown soil and a lingering petrocarbon reek. The farm buildings had slumped away from the explosion's hypocenter.

"Fantastic!" Rudi breathed.

Impressed despite himself, Poet nodded. "I've never seen Kosmos hit what they aim at with their first shot before," he said, loud enough to carry.

The bubble shield retracted. The dignitaries rose. The Servant's heavy-lidded eyes showed no expression as she removed her helmet.

"Behold the might of Kosmos Force, which serves and protects you as it carries forward the Historical Process!" Kammerer said, as he led them down to the fringe of the area churned up by the fuel-air explosive.

The Servant let the young ensign, visibly vibrating with excitement, take her arm and assist her. Haakon nodded to Kyov, who waved forward

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half the Section while he stayed with the others to cover from the road. With a trill of trepidation, Haakon noted that Poet led the advancing squad. He was a good man, but—

"Nothing could conceivably have survived the FAE blast," Kammerer declaimed. "My men will now spread dropcloths and provisions, and we shall picnic on the graves of these recidivist bandits!"

Brow set in a frown, the Servant scanned the waste with her dark eyes. Suddenly the scowl lifted, and she started walking forward.

"Bori. Stilicho," Haakon rapped. The two landers started after her.

She stopped, spread her knees, stooped, and reached. Her hand came up holding a flower, red spicules interspersed with triangle petals, that had survived the blast. She smiled.

Sixty meters away, a baggy figure emerged from the earth itself, raised a weapon to its shoulder, and fired. The Servant's head jerked as the projectile hit her on the right forehead, blew out the back of her skull, and mostly evacuated her cranium.

Stilicho dropped. Bori shrieked as if the bullet had struck him. Both fired. At the same instant, the rest of Section opened up in an orgasm of gunfire. Blue fingers, pallid in sunlight, reached for the autoc. The energy beams gave the impression of pulses traveling slow enough for the eye to follow, an optical illusion which gave the weapons their names.

The autoc dropped his rifle and did a strange random neuron dance; purplish gouts of steam gusted from his coveralls where the bolts went home. In a moment, he collapsed. It reminded Haakon of a grain sack emptying through a hole in the bottom, but speeded up enormously. Everything just went *out* of him.

Kyov bellowed to Section to cease fire. Haakon was speaking through his helmet headset, urging the rest of Company to keep holding their fire. Bori loped forward, loose-jointed, weeping tears of terror and rage, as he always did in combat.

The redheaded ensign was weeping, too, wailing, tearing great chunks of alien air as he sobbed. He melted to his knees. Before anyone could move toward him, he had his sidearm out. He wrapped his lips around the muzzle, and vaporized his head.

The Ground Observer had turned bright red and was bellowing nonsense in all directions. The Staff Captain simply stared, face white as bone bleached by blue alien suns.

Bori stood over the autoc, kicking what was left of him. Stilicho had joined him, covering the ground with his pulser. He craned forward, peered down.

"I'll be damned!" he called. "Lump of ling shit had a burrow out here. Got stressed-concrete walls, or I'm a revisionist!"

Bori came walking back, tears drying forgotten on his face. "Look at

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this," he said, holding out a tubular length of metal, melted here and twisted there by the energy bolts. It had a crutch handle welded to one end. The plastic pad had burned away.

"Homemade gun," Bori announced cheerfully. "Bet they used bits of high explosive for propellant, prob'ly machined steel bolts for projectiles."

Haakon stared at him. When whatever wits the chemspooling had left Big Bori kicked in, he tended to revert to his technical background.

Haakon reeled on his feet. Sweat ran down his face and spine. He was dead, but even with death leering into his face, that wasn't what he feared. It was humiliation. The boots and bright lights and being dragged facefirst along cold tile corridors, the probings with polyskin-covered fingers: he'd been through it once. He couldn't endure it again.

The Staff Captain found his voice. "*Dead men*," he croaked, voice knotted like a rag. "You are all dead men."

Haakon felt relieved tears fill his eyes.

"Fuck," Stilicho said, as Section tramped into a blacktop courtyard between lumpy cement buildings that used to be an autoc school. "We're supposed to be resting. What's all this about?"

"Firing party," Poet said absently. Everything he saw or heard or felt or tasted had that bright edging a good Zone overload laid down. He could feel every hair in his moustache.

"Who are we doing?"

"Some section from Mobile Infantry," Balt said. "Assholes."

"Process, I hate this shit!" Stilicho said. "Why is it always *us* has to shoot these zongs?"

"Because we're deathbirds," Poet said.

"I *like* it," Balt said, and licked his lips. "Fancy bastards got it comin'."

A yellow line had been painted across the center of the parking lot. Kosmos ratings in security brassards lined up the Section behind it, facing a blankness of wall.

"You okay, Lieutenant?" Kyov asked. He had a gift of sidelong speech without moving his lips.

Haakon nodded. He wasn't, but he couldn't admit it. He'd never taken part in a firing party before.

A clot of dignitaries emerged from the buildings and stood along the sidelines, well back from the line of fire. The first squad of condemned were marched out of the building opposite, lined up facing the Section among the painted half-chevrons of parking places.

Haakon wondered why these men were to die today, under a sun that had never seen a human birth, but had more than compensated by the quantity of human death it had shone upon. They never were told, the

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men said. CLD were menials, necessary but unnoticed in a ceremony such as this. Janitors of death.

He strained to hear the charges the plump man in Judicial coveralls was reading in a high voice. He didn't want to look at the observers—nor at the condemned, nor anyone at all—but he found his eyes drawn that way as by some unknown tropism.

He saw him.

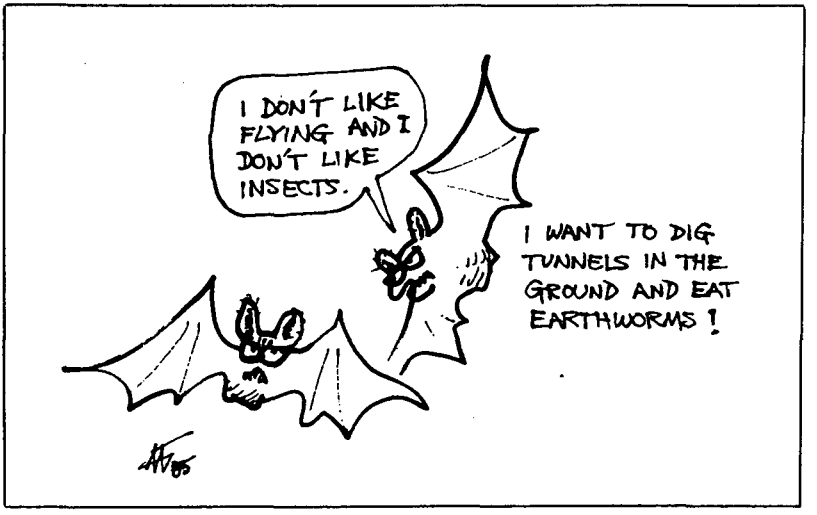
Straight as a dagger in gleaming Kosmos black. The Staff Captain with his face of bone. Staring straight ahead, seeing neither executioners nor condemned.

The words resolved out of the alien wind: "*—negligence resulting in the death of an Honored Servant of the People.*"

Haakon swayed. *How is this possible? We're supposed to be shooting* ourselves.

Kyov's hand gripped him above the elbow. Fingers dug in so hard red pain bolts sizzled up his arm. Pain alone kept him standing.

On Kyov's command, Section raised pulsers to shoulders and bent heads to optical sights. Poet wondered idly why the thin soldier with the black hair and features that seemed drawn in stroke lines, each aglow, was laughing so hysterically. ●



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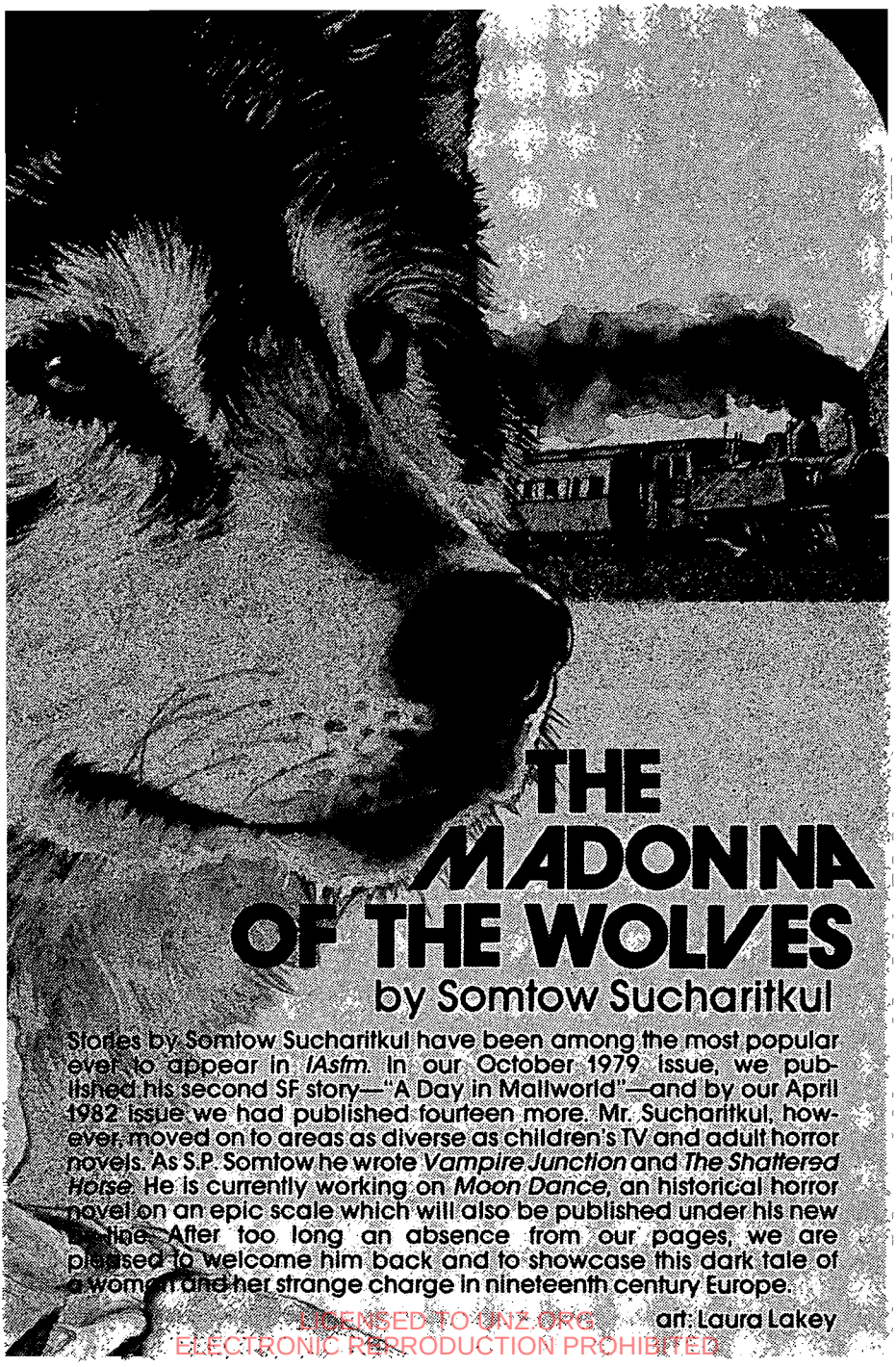

THE MADONNA OF THE WOLVES

by Somtow Sucharitkul

Stories by Somtow Sucharitkul have been among the most popular ever to appear in *IAsfm*. In our October 1979 issue, we published his second SF story—"A Day in Mallworld"—and by our April 1982 issue we had published fourteen more. Mr. Sucharitkul, however, moved on to areas as diverse as children's TV and adult horror novels. As S.P. Somtow he wrote *Vampire Junction* and *The Shattered Horse*. He is currently working on *Moon Dance*, an historical horror novel on an epic scale which will also be published under his new name. After too long an absence from our pages, we are pleased to welcome him back and to showcase this dark tale of a woman and her strange charge in nineteenth century Europe.

art: Laura Lakey

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"Excuse me. Might I respectfully inquire . . . are you . . . might you possibly be . . . Mademoiselle Martinique?"

"Sir, this is the ladies' waiting room. I trust that you will recognize the impropriety of your presence amongst these unescorted ladies, and that you will retire a few paces beyond the entrance and state your request without the forwardness you have just exhibited."

"I say. Awfully sorry, I'm sure."

Overhearing this conversation and her own name, Speranza Martinique looked up from her Bible. A corpulent woman, whose feathery hat ill suited her belligerent demeanor, was having an altercation with a bearded gentleman in morning dress. Perhaps this was the messenger that his lordship's secretary had mentioned in his letter to her. She rose and tugged at the fat woman's sleeve. "Your pardon, madam, but I think the gentleman is looking for me."

The woman turned on her with a look of sheer disdain. She shuddered, and her unnatural plumage shuddered with her. "A railway station waiting room is hardly the place for a furtive encounter," she said. "I find the fact that you seek to disguise your unnatural intentions behind a *Bible* most revolting."

Mildly, Speranza said to the aggravating woman: "Look to the mote in your own eye, madam; it is the best way, I have found, of alleviating the harm that a prolonged meditation on the world's evils can afflict upon a lady's refined sensibilities."

"I never!" the fat woman said, as Speranza swept past her and accosted the bearded gentleman, who was waiting by the entrance. She could see that he was amused by their exchange; but seeing her approach, he suppressed his laughter and was all gravity.

"Mademoiselle," he began in atrocious French, pulling a sealed paper from his waistcoat pocket, "j'ai l'honneur de vous présenter cette lettre écrite par—"

"Heavens!" the fat woman remarked, eavesdropping at the door. "I should have known. A Frenchwoman. What an unprincipled lot, those frogs!"

"Only half French, actually," Speranza said, "and half Italian. Oh, sir, do let's continue this conversation elsewhere! Certain people are becoming most tiresome! Surely the crowds that are gathered here will render a chaperone unnecessary."

"I say, you speak English awfully well, what."

"I do," Speranza said, "and if it is not too forward of me, might I ask that we use English from now on? I think my command of that tongue might be a little . . ." She tried to say it tactfully, but could not; so she changed the subject slightly. "I was, after all, the governess of the son

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of Lord Slatterthwaite, the Hon. Michael Bridgewater, before he was unfortunately taken from us—"

"Consumption, I understand," said the messenger, shaking his head. "But I have neglected to introduce myself. My name is Cornelius Quaid. I represent . . . a certain party, whose name I am not presently at liberty to divulge."

"Lord Slatterthwaite assured me that this party's credentials are impeccable. I will take him at his word, Mr. Quaid. And where is the boy?"

"Soft, soft, Mademoiselle Martinique. All in good time. First let me go over the plans with you. Here is the letter I spoke of; it will allow you and the lad safe passage to your destination. Attached to it is a banker's note which, you will find, will cover any emergency you may encounter; I trust you will not abuse it. The traveling papers, tickets, itineraries, and other paraphernalia are here as well. You depart in a little over an hour. Your things are at the left luggage office, I presume? I shall have my man see to them. Furthermore—" he reached into a capacious trouser pocket and pulled out a small purse "—I have been authorized to give you a small advance." Speranza was very grateful for this, for her dismissal from Lord Slatterthwaite's service, though no fault of hers, would have left her destitute, had it not been for this rather mysterious new development. "Count it at your leisure, mademoiselle. You will find that it contains one hundred guineas in gold. The rest, you may be sure, will be forthcoming upon the safe delivery of the boy to a certain Dr. Szymanowski, in Vienna."

"I will take your word on it, Mr. Quaid," Speranza said, tucking the purse into an inside pocket of her coat. Where was the child? His lordship had told her that her new duties would involve escorting a young lad across Europe, for which, he said, she was eminently suited; for not only was she trained in the care of children, but she was well acquainted not only with French, English, and Italian, but had a smattering of the many languages of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. There was no more information about the boy, however, and Speranza was anxious to learn all she could. She was regretting having left the relative warmth of the ladies' waiting room. Victoria Station, imposing though it was, was not well heated; and she could see, clinging to the hair of beggars and urchins and to the hats and overcoats of those who could afford them, evidence of the snowstorm that was raging without. It was a veritable bedlam here: flower girls, newspaper vendors, old women hawking steak and kidney pies, and of course the passengers themselves. Rich and poor, they shuffled about, their expressions bearing that self-imposed bleakness which Speranza found all too common amongst the English.

"The boy?" she said at last.

"Ah yes, the boy." For the first time, a look of trepidation seemed to

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cross the face of Cornelius Quaid. Was the boy ill? Consumptive, perhaps, and capable of spreading the disease? But Speranza had remained at poor little Michael's bedside day and night for many weeks. Surely, if she were going to catch it, she would have done so already.

She said, "Sir, I am not afraid of catching a disease. I take it that disease is at issue here, since you desire me to deliver him to this doctor. A specialist, I assume? I assure you I will take the greatest pains to—"

"Mademoiselle, the boy's affliction is not physical. It is of the soul."

"Ah, one of the newfangled *dementiae*?" Speranza was aware that certain research was being done into the dark recesses of the mind; but of course such subjects were not within the boundaries of decent discourse.

"No, I mean the soul, mademoiselle, not the mind."

She stiffened a little at this, for the fat lady had been unwittingly right in one thing; the Bible that Speranza Martinique carried upon her person was a purely cosmetic device. For Speranza suffered constantly from thoughts that, she felt, should correctly be suppressed; her severe dress and her Bible were intended to deflect the suspicions of strangers, who she was certain could see into her very soul did she not stand constant guard against discovery.

"The boy is possessed," Mr. Quaid said in profound earnest. "Sometimes, when the moon is full . . ."

"Tush, Mr. Quaid! This is the nineteenth century; we don't believe such superstitions any more, do we?" she said, a little uncomfortably, shivering a little, thinking to herself: I have every right to shiver, do I not? It is the dead of winter, and these beastly English do enjoy the cold so. "Let us just say that the boy is . . . ill."

"Very well, then. I am no expert on the young. But I will tell you this. The boy's parents are dead. They were killed under most unpleasant circumstances. I wasn't made privy to the details, but there was . . ." he lowered his voice, and Speranza had to strain to hear him, "devil worship. Heathen rites. Mutilation, I believe. Terrible, terrible!"

"If so, then the boy's distress is perfectly understandable. Possession, indeed! Grief, confusion, perhaps a misunderstanding of the nature of good and evil . . . nothing that proper, attentive care won't heal," Speranza said. She did not add—though she almost blurted it out—that she found the English notion of loving care most astonishing, consisting as it did of little more than an assiduous application of the birch to the behind. Ah, where do they get their love of flagellation from? she mused.

"Well," Mr. Quaid said, interrupting her reverie, "it is time you met your charge."

He gestured. So imperious was his gesture that the crowd seemed to part. Two men came forward; they appeared to be footmen from some well-established household. The boy was between them. The shame of

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it, Speranza thought, having him escorted like a prisoner! After all he has suffered!

"Come, Johnny," said Mr. Quaid. "This is Mademoiselle Martinique, who will assume the responsibility for your welfare until you are safely in the hands of Dr. Szymanowski."

He makes him sound like a sacrificial animal, Speranza thought. And she looked at the boy who walked towards her with his eyes downcast. She had expected a rich, pampered-looking child; but Johnny wore clothes that, had they not recently been cleaned, might have come from a poorhouse; his coat, she noticed with her practiced eye, had been clumsily mended. He was blond and blue-eyed; his hair was clipped short; only prisoners and denizens of lunatic asylums had their hair that short, because they had sold it to wigmakers. She wondered where Johnny had been living before his nameless benefactor found him. And no more than seven years old! Or perhaps he was small for his age, improperly fed. He came closer but continued to stare steadfastly at the ground. His face, she noticed, was scarred in a dozen places. He had clearly been mistreated. Those English! she thought bitterly, remembering that even in the final stages of his consumption the Hon. Michael Bridgewater had occasionally been subjected to the rod.

And to the fresh air, she remembered. That fresh air that they love so much here, freezing though it might be. She was sure that the fresh air had driven little Michael to his death. She was determined that no such thing would happen to this Johnny. Already she felt a fierce protectiveness towards him.

"Johnny Kindred," Cornelius Quaid said, "you are to obey your new guardian in all ways. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," the boy mumbled.

"You may shake Mademoiselle Martinique's hand. Bow smartly. There. Now say, 'How do you do, Mademoiselle Martinique.' "

Speranza grew impatient. "Mr. Quaid, I trust you will allow me to exercise my particular speciality now." She turned to the child and took his hand. It was shaking with terror. She gripped it affirmatively, reassuringly. "You may call me Speranza," she said to him. "And you needn't shake my hand. You may kiss me on the cheek, if you like."

Mr. Quaid rolled his eyes disapprovingly.

"Speranza," the boy said, looking at her for the first time.

She did not wait for Mr. Quaid to harangue her. Without further ado, still grasping the boy's hand, she steered him towards the platform. Soon they would reach the sea. Soon they would cross the English Channel and reach a land where men did not hesitate to show their feelings.

Already she had begun to love the child they had entrusted to her care. Already she was determined to heal his anguish. Affliction of the soul

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indeed, the poor boy! Speranza believed that love could cure most every illness. And though she was a woman possessed of many accomplishments, it was love that was her greatest talent.

On the train from London, on the ferry across the Channel, the boy said nothing at all. In France he merely asked for food and drink at the appropriate times. Their benefactor had bought them second class tickets; Speranza was glad of that, for she had had occasion to travel by third class, and she knew that it would be crowded and cold and crammed to bursting with unpleasant characters.

When they crossed the German border, the two old priests who had been occupying their compartment left, and she and the boy had it to themselves. His mood lightened a little. There was not much to watch but fields and fields of snow, and now and then a country station with an ornate, wrought-iron sign and a bench or two. Speranza decided that the best tactic would be to wait; when the boy was ready, he would doubtless begin to talk. He was afraid of everything; she already knew that, for whenever she tried to touch him, he flinched violently away from her as though she were on fire.

A few kilometers into Germany, the boy asked her, "Have you any games, Mademoiselle?"

At last, she thought, he is giving me an opening. Another part of her reflected: Yet I must not become too attached to him; he is mine for only a few more days. And in the back of her mind she saw Michael Bridgewater's pathetically small coffin being lowered into the ground. That too had been in the snow.

"Speranza," she said to him, reminding him that they were to be companions, not opponents. She opened a valise which Quaid's people had provided, labeled *Entertainments*; it contained, she saw, a pack of cards, a backgammon set, and a snakes and ladders board. "Shall we play this?" she said, pulling it out and setting it down on the middle seat, between them. Steadily the fields of snow unreeled. The game was not printed on cardboard, but handpainted on a silken surface. The snakes were very realistically depicted. There was a velvet pouch with a pair of ivory dice and a tortoiseshell die-cup.

The boy nodded.

"Good, Johnny," she said. She wished she could pat his cheek, but knew that he would flinch again. Instead she handed him the dice.

He threw a 3 and eagerly moved his counter three squares. There was a ladder, and he clambered up to the third row. Speranza threw a 5, and was stuck on the bottom. They played for a few minutes, until Speranza encountered her first snake and slid back down almost to square one. Johnny laughed.

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Then he said, "Those snakes, they're just like a man's prick, aren't they, Speranza?"

Speranza did not quite believe she had heard him say that. She was flustered for a moment, then said, "Why, where did you learn a word like that from, Johnny?"

"Jonas taught me."

"And who might Jonas be?" Speranza asked, intrigued. Clearly the boy's upbringing had had almost nothing to commend it.

The boy said nothing; he had a guilty look, and Speranza felt that to probe further would perhaps be inopportune. They went on playing. Johnny's counter hit a snake and slid. He cackled. "Right through to the snake's bleeding arsehole!" he said. His voice seemed different; harsher, more grownup.

"Johnny, I am a rather unorthodox woman, but even I find your language a trifle indecent," she said mildly.

"Fuck you!" Johnny said. He looked her straight in the eye. There was anger in those eyes, blazing, unconscionable anger. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!"

"Johnny!"

He started to cry. "I'm sorry," he sobbed, "I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. Jonas told me to do it, it wasn't me, honestly it wasn't." He crumpled into her arms, dashing the snakes and ladders board to the floor. Seeing how much he needed affection made Speranza hug him tightly to her. But as he buried his face in her breast she heard him growl, she *felt* his growl reverberate against the squeezing of her corsets. It was like the purring of a cat, but far more vehement, far more menacing. She thought: I cannot be afraid of him; he is only a child, a poor hurt child, and she clasped him to her bosom, struggling not to disclose her anxiety.

They crossed the Rhine. At Karlsruhe, they waited for several hours; part of the train was detached and sent north, and they were to be joined by another segment that had come up from Basle. Thinking to give the boy some exercise, Speranza took him for a walk, up and down the platform. Although the station was canopied, there was some snow and slush on the cars and on the tracks, and many of the passengers milling around outside had snow in their hair and on their coats. The car that joined theirs was elaborate, and bore on its sides the crest of some aristocratic family. Of course, Speranza thought, we have to wait for those high-and-mighty types.

"Let's go and see!" Johnny said. There was nothing in him now of the obscene, deep-voiced child that had emerged earlier. He was all innocence. She was convinced now that his problem was some kind of division

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within his soul, some combat between the forces of light and darkness. Taking his hand, she took him up to the carriage.

Heavy drapes prevented one from seeing inside. The car seemed dilapidated, and the coat-of-arms had not been painted lately; beneath it was the legend:

von Bächl-Wölfing

in the *fraktur* script which Speranza found difficult to read. The arms themselves were fairly ordinary looking. Two silver wolf's heads glared at each other across a crimson field. Argent, she reminded herself, and gules. Little Michael had always been very particular about heraldry. But then he had been the son of a peer of the realm. As she mused on her former life as the young aristocrat's governess, she saw that Johnny had stepped up very close to the track, that he was shaking his fist at the coat-of-arms . . . that the same menacing growl was issuing from his throat.

Then, to her alarm, Johnny pulled down his trousers and urinated onto the side of the train.

"Johnny, you must stop!"

"I am Jonas!" He turned; their eyes met once; she saw that his eyes were slitty-golden . . . like the eyes of a wild animal! Terrified, she started to follow him, but he growled and sprinted to the front of the train, across the track, clambered up to the other side of the platform. She called after him. Then she started to run after him.

I'll have to take a short cut, she thought. She dived into the train. An old peasant woman with two hens in a basket looked up at her. She tried to open the door on the other side, but it would not come open.

She pressed her face against the window, called his name again. He was urinating again, on the track, on the steps into the train, and shouting, "This is my place I'll not run in your pack I'm me I'm me leave me alone alone alone!"

"Help me," Speranza whispered. "If you please, though I can't speak your language . . . au secours, j'ai perdu mon enfant. . . ."

Some of the others in the carriage were looking out, too. A burly man said to her, "Is' es Ihr Kind dort aufm Gleis?"

She nodded, not understanding. The man began shouting, and an official in uniform came and opened the door. Speranza and some of the others leapt down onto the side of the track.

"I'll not run in it I'll not I'll not!" Johnny screamed, spraying them with piss.

"Was sagt er denn?" The strange man caught the boy and held him tight as he wriggled. "Beruhe dich," he said softly to him, and stroked him gently on the neck and head. Johnny grew still.

"Thank you." Speranza reached out to take him from the man. He was

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curled up in fetal position, sucking his thumb. His clothes and his face and arms were stained and foul-smelling; it was an unfamiliar odor, as though his urine were somehow not quite human.

In the compartment, she filled a jug with water, moistened a towel, and began to swab his face. He did not stir. A whistle sounded, and the train began to ease itself away from the station. The odor was pungent, choking. But Speranza had cleaned and washed little Michael every day in the last weeks of his consumption, and her stomach was not easily turned. The boy seemed to be fast asleep. She did not want to embarrass him. She took off his coat and laid him on it. Very gently she began to undo his back and front collar-stud and to pull his shirt over his head, and to unbutton his braces so that she could unfasten his trousers. The shirt tore as it came away. The backs of the child's hands were covered with fine, shiny hair. His back was unusually hairy, too; when she started to wipe it it gleamed like sealskin. There were welts and scars all over him; she knew from this that he had been beaten, probably habitually, since many of the marks were white and smooth. She wrung out the cloth, soaked it in water again, and cleansed him as best she could. Though she tried to look away, she could not help seeing his tiny penis, quite erect above a tuft of silverwhite hair. She did not think little Michael had had hair down there. This boy definitely had some minor physical abnormalities as well as his obvious emotional ones.

The sun began to set behind distant white hills. She managed to get him into a nightgown that had been starched stiff; clearly it had never been used before, like all the other clothes in the trunk that Quaid's men had loaded onto the train. The sharpness of the fabric must have disturbed him. He opened his eyes and said, "Tell me a story, please, Speranza. Then I'll be fast asleep and Jonas won't come, he never comes when I'm asleep."

She was going to ask him about Jonas, but she was afraid her questioning might bring more strange behavior; so she merely said, easing back into the padded seat and allowing him to lie with his head against the lace and black satin of her skirts, "What story would you like? A story about a prince in a castle? A beautiful princess? A dragon, perhaps? Or would that be too frightening?"

"I want Little Red Riding Hood," he said in a small voice. "But make Little Red Riding Hood a boy."

She tried not to show how startled she was at his request. She felt a strange indecency about what he had asked, though she could not put into words why it would feel that way. She did not look at him while she spoke; she watched the fields go by, the snow slowly blooded by the setting sun. "Once upon a time there was a girl—"

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"A boy."

"—named Little Red Riding Hood who lived by the edge of the forest." When she reached the part about the wolf dressed in the grandmother's clothing, the boy clung to her in terror, but that terror was also something a little bit like lust . . . she had always known that children are not pure and innocent, as the English liked to believe. But the idea that the boy was enjoying her discomfiture, actually, in some inchoate way, taking advantage of her person . . . and yet, she could tell already, he loved her. So she went on: "And the wolf said, 'The better to eat you with, my darling boy.' And ate the little boy up. In one gulp. And then the hunters—"

"That's enough. They just put the hunters in so little children won't be frightened. But you and I know the truth, don't we?"

"The truth?"

"The hunters don't care. And even if the boy was still alive inside the wolf, then the hunters' rifles would just rip them both apart anyway, wouldn't they, Speranza?"

"It's only a story," she said. The sexual tension had passed away; perhaps, Speranza thought, it was just in herself, she had imagined it; how could a seven-year-old boy, even a profoundly disturbed one, manipulate me in this fashion?

"It's not a story, Speranza. Believe me. And if you can't quite make yourself believe me, maybe you'll talk to Jonas one day." And he drifted into sleep, lulled by the repetitive clanging, and she covered him and sat thinking for a long time. She had forgotten, after all the day's commotion, that they had missed the early session in the dining car.

There was a knock at the door.

"Darf ich herein, bitte?" A slimy voice; the sort of man used to toadying; not the kind of voice she expected for a railway official. Her heart beat faster.

"Je m'excuse," she said in French, "je ne comprends pas l'allemand." Then she added in English, "Please, sir, I have no German."

She unlatched the door of the compartment.

It was a man in evening dress, very stiff and proper, bearing a silver tray. "May it please you, Fräulein Martinique," he said, "my master would very much enjoy the pleasure of your company at dinner, now that the boy is asleep."

"How does he know—"

"He felt it, gnädiges Fräulein. In his heart."

"Sir, I do not think it is quite proper for a man to invite a woman to whom he has not been properly introduced—"

The steward, or butler, or whoever it was, handed her the little platter.

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There was a calling card on it, printed on rag paper, with a gold border. It contained only the name:

Graf Hartmut von Bächl-Wölfing

Speranza knew that the word *Graf* meant Count or Earl or some such title. What did this man know about her and the boy? How could he have felt the boy's waking and sleeping? And why did Johnny try to urinate all over the Count's railway carriage? She was afraid of what this might be leading to. She felt a premonition of something . . . unnatural. Perhaps even supernatural. But Speranza was not superstitious, and curiosity vanquished her fear.

The Count's servant was waiting for her reply.

"I will be glad to come," she said, "if you will send someone to watch the child while I dine; and perhaps the Count's cook could prepare some small tidbit for me to bring back to him. Poor Johnny is worn out, but he hasn't had his supper, and I think he may wake up hungry in the middle of the night."

The servant paused, perhaps translating her comments to himself; the train clattered as it negotiated a curve. "Yes, gnädiges Fräulein," he said at last.

"Now leave me so that I can dress. If I am to meet a Count, I ought perhaps to try not to look so shabby," she said, feeling suddenly frail.

When the man departed, Speranza looked through her trunk and found little to wear; she changed into a somewhat cleaner black dress, tried to tidy her hair, and threw over the drab costume a rabbitfur pelisse. She did have a few articles of jewelry; she selected a silver necklace studded with cabochon amethysts. A little ostentatious, perhaps? But it was all she had. She looked at her reflection against the glass and the snow. Perhaps, she thought, I could be more attractive. In the window I seem to be a governess, only a governess . . . but I have dark dreams for a governess, dark and daring thoughts.

Presently a serving maid, perhaps fourteen, in a uniform came, curtseyed, said, "Für den Knaben." Speranza assumed she had come to watch the boy, and left; the manservant was waiting to conduct her down the corridor. A moment of intense cold as the footman helped her across the precarious coupling beween the two cars, and then it was warm again, stiflingly warm, inside the domain of the Count von Bächl-Wölfing.

The first thing she felt was gloom. The curtains were tightly drawn, and the only light was from a gold candelabrum in the middle of a table of dark Italian marble. The candles were black. The servant showed her to a fauteuil, overplump, dusty, dark velvet; a second servant poured wine into a crystal goblet. Were it not for the ceaseless motion of the

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train, she would have thought herself in a sumptuous, if somewhat ill-kept, apartment in Mayfair.

The servant, seeming to address the empty room, said, "Euer Gnade, das französische Fräulein, das Ihr eingeladen habt." He bowed.

"Welcome," said a voice: liquid, deep, suggestive, even, of some hidden eroticism. At first she saw only eyes; the eyes glittered. Strangely, they reminded her of Johnny's eyes, when he had undergone that eerie metamorphosis into his other, demented self; clear, yellow, like polished topazes. Now she saw the face they were set in: a lean face, a man clearly middleaged yet somehow also youthful. His hair, balding, was silver save for a dark streak above his left temple. His upper lip sported the barest hint of a mustache.

He said, "Ou est-que vous préférez que je vous parle en français, peut-être?" His pronunciation was impeccable.

"It doesn't matter," Speranza said, "what we speak. But perhaps you can explain to me . . . oh, so many things . . . who are you, why do you seem to know so much about the child and me."

"I am but a pilgrim," von Bächl-Wölfing said, "I journey to the same shrine as you, my dear Mademoiselle Martinique—or perhaps you will permit me the liberty of addressing you as Speranza. Your name means *hope*, and without hope our cause is doomed, alas."

"Your cause?"

The Count moved closer to her, and seated himself in a leather armchair. "Ah yes. We are all going to see Dr. Szymanowski, are we not?"

"I am to deliver the boy to him."

He sighed; she felt an almost unbearable sadness in him, though she could not tell why. It was as if his emotions were borne on the dust in the air of the carriage, as though she could smell his melancholy. "And after?" he said.

"I do not know, sir. Perhaps I shall return to my family in Aix-en-Provence." A maid was serving a fish course; the Count nibbled distractedly, but Speranza was more hungry than she had thought. "Something your servant said . . . that you *felt* that Johnny had gone to sleep . . . in your heart. What did that mean?"

"We have a secret language."

"But you did not even see him."

The Count wrinkled his nose. "I most certainly smelt him, mademoiselle! Still that odor lingers in the air . . . ah, but you cannot smell it. Some of us are more . . . deprived . . . than others."

"If you are referring to Johnny's unfortunate . . . accident . . ."

"It was no accident!" the Count said, laughing. "But he has much to learn. A youngling cannot usurp the territory of a leader merely by baptizing his environment with piss! Ah, but you are shocked at my

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language; I forgot, you have been in England for a long while. Seriously, mademoiselle, the boy knows only instinct at the moment; soon he will combine that instinct with intelligence. To be able to help mold his mind, so malleable, yet so filled with all that separates our kind from—"

"I have no idea, Count, what you are talking about."

"I apologize. I begin to ramble when the moon waxes. It makes up for the times when I am robbed of the power of human discourse."

Why, Speranza thought, he is as mad as the boy is! Who was this Dr. Szymanowski? Surely the purveyor of a lunatic asylum. And they were going to use Johnny. Experiments, perhaps. Speranza had read *Frankenstein*. She knew what scientists could be like. She wondered whether the young serving girl who was alone with the boy was really—

"She knows nothing," said Count von Bächl-Wölfing.

"You read minds, Count?"

"No. But I *am* observant," he said softly. "I know, for example, that though you appear to me in the guise of a prim, severe governess, that is merely a shield behind which hides a woman of passion, a woman who can take agonizing risks; a dangerous woman, a woman fascinated by what other women shy away from; a woman capable of profound, consuming love."

Speranza's heart began to pound. "Count, I am perhaps a more modern woman than many of my occupation; but I hardly think the first few moments of a meeting, even when the difference in rank between us is so great, is a suitable time for—"

"You are quite wrong, Speranza. I do desire you, but . . . some things one can perforce live without. The boy is important, though. He is a new thing, you see, a wholly new kind of creature. But I see you do not understand me." He sighed; again she seemed to sense that perfume of dolorousness in the air. "It is all so unfair of me . . . but believe me, I would not say these things about you without having first ordered a thorough investigation into your character."

"My character is unassailable!" Speranza said, feeling terribly vulnerable, for the Count had ripped away the mask, so painstakingly assumed, and exposed it for the flimsy self-delusion that it was. "How dare you pry into my life, how dare you have me brought here! I think that under the circumstances I should depart immediately."

"Of course. But before that there is something I ought perhaps to tell you."

"We have nothing to say to each other—"

"Except, Mademoiselle Martinique, that I happen to be your employer."

"You! Who communicated with Lord Slatterthwaite—who sent Cornelius Quaid to Victoria Station—" She was trembling now; she felt as

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lost and bewildered as poor mad Johnny Kindred, who did not know if he was one person or two.

The Count merely smiled, and offered her another glass of wine.

Speranza had left the Count's private coach as soon as she could. She had found the child awake, picking at the light supper which had been brought in for him: a little pâté, a bowl of soup, a loaf of black bread, a goblet of hot spiced wine. The maid, seeing her approach so soon after she had left to join von Bächl-Wölfing, curtseyed and departed, smirking . . . or was Speranza only imagining the worst?

"You stink of him," the boy said. It was the other one. The one with the tongue of a guttersnipe. "You reek of him, he's bursting with animal spunk, he's been wanking all over your cunny, did you let him get inside?" Speranza did not attempt to respond, but waited for the fit to end. At last Johnny Kindred emerged long enough to say, "I'm glad you're back; stay with me always." And then he fell asleep in her arms.

The night passed uneasily. Moving, the train seemed to breathe. She was in the belly of a serpent, slithering over the snow, towards . . . . towards . . . she could not tell. She blew out the lamp, eased the boy onto his back on the seat opposite hers, and stared at the passing snowscape. Dark firs, silvered by the moon, stretched as far as she could see. Cold, dappled, the light streamed into the compartment. She tried not to think of the Count von Bächl-Wölfing. But her dreams were of being pursued by him through the dank forest, the stench of earth and wolf-piss burning her nostrils, the wind sharp and ice-cold . . . in the dream she remembered thinking that they had left the German forests behind, that this was some quite alien forest of leviathan trees and unfamiliar animals, a forest in some strange new world.

In the morning the same servant appeared with an invitation to breakfast. "You should bring the child," the man said. She looked at Johnny. He seemed contrite; he offered no resistance as she dressed him from the clothes they found in the trunk. For herself she again selected dark colors; again she wore the silver necklace, although she was afraid he would think poorly of her for wearing the same jewelry two days in a row. Then she castigated herself for her foolishness. The Count was immeasurably wealthy, and, more to the point, far above her station; she was only a governess, and of dubious legitimacy at that!

The curtains in the Count's car were still closed. She could not help noticing the smell; she recognized it from last night's dream. The boy began to growl. "Quiet, Johnny, quiet," she said softly. Some daylight seeped in between the closed draperies; dust swam in the rays. She could see the Count's back; he was seated at a writing desk, paying them no

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heed. She took in details she had missed before; the car was partitioned by a curtain of heavy purple velvet bearing the wolf-crest; perhaps there was a sleeping area behind. Suddenly she was afraid the boy would start pissing on all the priceless furniture. But his growling seemed more for show; soon he became withdrawn, fidgety, his eyes following a dust-mote as it circled.

The Count moved, shrugged perhaps; abruptly the divider drew open, and music played from the adjoining section, soft-pedaled chords on a piano. After a few bars, a clear, sweet tenor voice joined in with a plaintive melody in the minor key. Sunlight streamed in.

The boy's attention was drawn immediately to the music. At last, for the first time, he smiled.

"Schubert," Speranza said, for the song cycle *Winterreise* had not been unknown in the Slatterthwaite household, though His Lordship had sung it in his cousin's stilted English translation, with little Michael pounding unmercifully on the family Broadwood. She had not known it could be so beautiful.

The Count said: " *'Fremd bin ich eingezogen, fremd zieh ich wieder aus.'* Do you know what it means, Speranza? It means, 'I came here a stranger; a stranger I depart.' How true. Look, the boy understands it instinctively. He is no longer annoyed with me."

He clapped his hands. The music stopped; the boy's smile faded. "Shall we have breakfast now?" He got up and beckoned them to follow; as he crossed the partition, he nodded and the music resumed almost in mid-note. She took Johnny by the hand and led him. As they passed the desk where von Bächl-Wölfing had been sitting, she saw that he had been writing a letter in English. She had already read the salutation—"My dear Vanderbilt"—before realizing her appalling breach of manners. Of course she would never normally have contemplated scrutinizing another's correspondence; it only showed how powerful an effect the Count had had on her. She resolved to be more prim, more severe in her demeanor. She would not step one inch over the line of propriety—not one inch!

They had a pleasant enough breakfast of pheasant pâté, egg-and-bacon pies, and toast and marmalade. Coffee was served in blue-and-white Delft demitasses. She admired the china. She admired the cutlery, whose ivory handles were carved in the shape of lean wolves, each one with tiny topaz eyes. Throughout the meal the Count said little. He stared at the boy. The boy stared back. They spoke without words. She became aware that she was babbling, trying to fill an uncomfortable silence with chatter. She stopped abruptly. The music filled the air. Schubert's song cycle dealt with beauty and desolation. And so it was here. The windows had been opened a crack, driving out the musky animal odor. The train moved

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out of the forest, past frozen lakes and somnolent villages. There were mountains in the distance. In a few hours they would enter the empire of Austria-Hungary, teeming with exotic peoples and dissonant languages. She sipped her coffee, which was flavored with nutmeg and topped with whipped cream, and watched the wordless communion of the deranged boy and the worldly aristocrat.

At last the Count said, "You seem to have made quite an impression on the boy, Speranza. He loves you very much, you know. You have a certain magic with children . . . and even, I may add, with the middleaged."

He smiled disarmingly. She blushed like a schoolgirl even as she forced herself to purse her lips and respond with unyielding decorum. "You are pleased to flatter me, Count," she said.

"You shall call me Hartmut," he said expansively.

"I would not make such a presumption," Speranza said. Her pulse quickened. She steadied her hand by meticulously buttering a slice of toast and applying the pâté to it, patting it into place and making firm, precise ridges with the pâté-knife. Before she could finish, he had reached across the table and was grasping her hand firmly. His hand was hairy and slick with sweat. She felt as though her hand had been plunged into a furnace. Quickly she snatched it away. The Count smiled with his lips, with the contours of his face; but his eyes betrayed an untouchable sadness.

"What are you thinking? That you should touch that sadness?" How strange, she thought, that he could read her mind so accurately. "Ah, but you have not yet learnt the impossibility of the task you set yourself. You are young, so terribly young. Can *you* cage the beast within, Speranza, even though you are fully human?"

"Sir, you are forward."

"It is because you wish it."

There was danger here, though the compartment was awash with light. Speranza decided that she might as well be direct. "Why, Count von Bächl-Wölfing, have you had us brought here? Why do you keep hinting of mysteries? There is an air that you affect, a feeling almost of some supernatural being. I do not think that it is merely the result of your high birth, if I do not overstep—"

"Everything you have imagined, mademoiselle, is true."

But she had not yet imagined . . . the boy was growling again. He was toying with his food. He leapt onto the table on all fours. The Count turned to him. In a second his face seemed transformed. He snarled once. The boy slid sullenly back into his seat. The Count's face returned to normal. Speranza studied him for some clue as to its metamorphosis, but saw nothing.

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"What did you do to make him stop?" she asked him.

"We have a way with each other."

"To return to this subject . . . why are we playing at these guessing games, Count? I am a modern woman, and not fond of mysteries."

"I am a werewolf."

They rode on, not speaking, for some moments. The train clattered harshly against the Schubert melodies. Her rational mind told her that the Count was once more entertaining some elaborate fantasy to which she was not privy. Once more she considered the notion that he might be as mad as little Johnny. But another part of her had already seized on the statement. She could not deny that it was intriguing. Though she hardly dared admit it to herself, she even found the idea glamorous.

"Noch was Kaffee, gnädiges Fräulein?" the manservant said, smoothly gliding into position on her right. She nodded absently and he poured.

"I hear no reaction, mademoiselle, to what must constitute a most singular revelation." Was he laughing at her? But no, he seemed all seriousness. "Perhaps I should go on about wolf's bane, about nocturnal metamorphoses under the full moon, about silver bullets, and so on. But you will only say, 'I am a modern woman,' and dismiss with that specious argument the accumulated knowledge of millennia. Let me suggest, instead, that you ask the boy. He knew at once. He knows now. By the way, he's a werewolf, too."

She turned to Johnny. She knew at once that the boy believed at least part of what the Count was saying. But there was something not quite right about Johnny's place in this scheme. "Perhaps you, Count, are suffering from some dementia that convinces you that you are . . . other than human," she said. "But Johnny's troubles are far less simple."

"True," said the Count. "How quickly you have divined, mademoiselle, the dilemma that is at the very heart of my involvement with him!" He did not seem to want to expand on the subject, and turned his attention instead to a snuffbox which his manservant had brought him on a silver tray.

She was bursting with curiosity and frustration. Instead she asked him, "And Dr. Szymanowski? Who is he?"

"A visionary, my dear mademoiselle! Whereas I . . . I merely pay the bills. By the way, what is your opinion of America?"

Taken aback by his change of subject, she said, "Why, very little, Count! That is, I know that it is a wild country of savages who are ruled by renegades scarcely less savage than the *Indiens peaux-rouges* themselves."

The Count laughed. "Ah, a wild country. Perhaps you will understand why it calls to the wildness within us. In humans, but especially in us, who are—humor me at least for the moment—not entirely human. It

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cries to us across the very sea." Almost as an afterthought, he added, "I have been making a number of investments there. They are, I think, shrewd ones."

Speranza had the distinct impression that he was attempting, in a roundabout manner, to answer her questions; at the same time he was testing her, daring her to reveal the darkness inside herself. There was also something in him of a small boy with a secret . . . the frog in the waistcoat pocket . . . the Latin book coded with obscene messages in invisible ink . . . he wanted to know if he could trust her with the truth, but the truth excited him so much that he could hardly restrain himself from spilling everything. Even the sadness in his eyes seemed to have lifted a little. This in him she could understand, for she well knew the minds of children.

She had an idea. "But the cutlery . . . is it not silver? And if it is true that you are indeed what you claim to be . . . is not silver a substance that might cause you distress?"

"My dear Speranza, heft my spoons and forks in your dainty hands! Are they not of unwonted heaviness? I have no cutlery on my dining table that is not purest platinum." He grinned, as though to say, "I was ready for that one; ask something a little more tricky."

"And the full moon. . . ."

"Will soon be upon us. Oh, don't worry, my dear Mademoiselle Martinique. You will be quite safe, as long as you observe certain conditions which I will spell out to you before moonrise. Ah, I see that you are skeptical, are you not? You think little of these extravagant claims?"

"Only, Count, that you are possessed of a powerful imagination." She felt uncomfortable, since both man and boy were staring intently at her, so she continued, "Oh, come, sir! Here we are sitting amidst brilliant sunshine, doing nothing more supernatural than eating a pheasant pâté; how can you expect your ghost stories to have their full effect?"

"Ghost stories! Is that what you think they are?"

"Is it not what they are?"

"You mistake me, Speranza. I do not believe in ghosts. Nor spirits, nor demons, nor any of the trappings of damnation. How can I allow myself to believe in such things? I would fall prey to the utmost despair, for in the Christian hegemony in which we find ourselves, such as I dare hope for no salvation, no redemption from the everlasting fire; we are damned already, damned without hope, damned before we are ever judged! Quindi, Speranza, quindi bramo la speranza!"

He spoke to her in her mother's tongue, the tongue of gentleness and warmth; she felt as though he had violated her final, innermost hiding place. She did not yield, but continued in English, to her the coldest of

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languages: "And why, Count von Bächl-Wölfing, why is it that you so ardently yearn for hope?"

"But I forget myself." The Count's passion had been but fleeting; now he was all correctness. "I apologize for inflicting my religious torment on you, mademoiselle; I trust you have not been too disturbed by my words?"

"On the contrary, the fault is mine," Speranza said automatically, thinking nothing of the kind. "I should perhaps be going now?"

The sun hung low over the snow.

Johnny sat with his nosed pressed against the pane.

"What do you think?" he asked her suddenly. "Shall we trust him? Shall we run with him in the cold cold forest?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"You're going to go to him tonight, aren't you? He'll invite you. Maybe he won't, but you'll find some excuse. Because you're dying from curiosity. You want to know if it's true. And you want to fuck him."

"Johnny, I really must insist—" But she knew that all he said was true. He understood her so well, this lunatic.

"My language. I can't help it, though, I'm possessed by demons, you see. Everyone says so."

"Johnny, there aren't any demons. Even the Count says so."

"I don't want to be this way."

"You don't have to be, Johnny, because I'm going to help you, I'm going to pull you out of this sickness of yours somehow."

"Will you love me, Speranza?"

"Of course I will."

"Then you must fuck me, too, mustn't you?" The words no longer offended her; she knew it was part of his illness. Somehow these things had become terribly confused for him. How could she blame him? Even she was confused, and she was a sane woman, was she not? She tried to pry him from the window, thinking to comfort him; he resisted at first, but then threw himself into her arms with a hunger that was like anger, and it frightened her, how so much passionate anguish could come in so frail a package; and as she hugged him she heard him wailing, with a desperate concern for her and for his own future, "When you go to see him tonight, you have to wear the silver necklace, don't ever take it off whatever he says don't you ever ever *ever* take it off!"

The inner world of Johnny Kindred was like a forest: not the picture-book forest of fairytales, but a forest of gnarled trees knotted with rage, of writhing vines, of earth pungent with piss and putrescence, of clammy darkness. At the very center of the forest there was a clearing. The circle

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was the center of the world, and it was bathed in perpetual, pallid moonlight. When you stood in the circle of light, you could see the outside world, you could hear, touch, smell. You controlled the body. But you always had to fend off the others. Especially Jonas.

And when you were tired, they gathered, surrounding the circle, thirsting for the light. Waiting to touch the world outside.

Waiting to use the body.

Right now the circle was empty. The body slept.

"Let me through," Johnny said faintly.

The darkness seethed. Vines shifted. And always the wolves howled. There were unformed persons in the depths of the forest, their strength growing. Johnny could smell them. He could smell Jonas most of all. Jonas hanging head downward from a tree. Jonas laughing, the drool glistening on his canines. Calling his name: "Johnny, Johnny, you silly boy, you're just a fucking figment, you're just a dream."

"Let me through—" He had to step into the light before the body wakened. Because the moon would be rising soon.

"Through? You don't even exist. I'm the owner of this body, and you're just a little thing I made up once to amuse myself. Get back, get back. Into the dark, do you hear? Or I'll send for—"

"No!"

"Our father."

"Our father in Hell," Johnny whispered.

"In Hell." He could see Jonas more clearly now. The other boy was swinging back and forth, back and forth. He looked like one of the cards in their mother's tarot deck . . . The Hanged Man. "Fuck you! Why did you have to think of our mother, simple Johnny? Do you want to go back to the madhouse? Perhaps you have fond memories of your mudlarking days, my little mad brother?"

"I forgot. That you can read my mind." The thought of their mother could still hurt Jonas. Johnny tried to think of her again, but he saw only a great blackness. Jonas had been at work, striking out any bits of the past that displeased him, tossing them aside like the offal that lined the banks of the Thames, like the rubbish piled up against the walls of their old home. Jonas used to bully him all the time at the home. Whenever the beatings started he would push Johnny out into the clearing so that Johnny would feel all the pain. Even though it was always Jonas who had done wrong. "Get out of my mind!" Johnny screamed, despairing.

"Our mind. No. My mind. It's *my* mind, you're in *my* mind. Why can't you be more like me? I'm not a snivelling, snotty-nosed boy who's afraid of the truth. Our mother never could face the truth, could she? You're weak, like *her*, weak, weak, weak!"

Johnny started to run. The mud clung to his toes. Brambles slithered

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around his ankles. Thorns sliced into his arms, opening up fresh wounds. The clearing didn't get any nearer. He leapt over rotted logs and mossy stones. He had to reach it first, he had to. Dread seeped into him. He knew that Jonas was swinging from tree to tree, his animal eyes piercing the dark. There it was! He was at the edge now, all he had to do was step inside—

He fell! Twigs and leaves flurried. He was at the bottom of a pit. He breathed uneasily. His hand collided with something hard. Pale light leaked in from the clearing. He saw who was in the trap with him . . . a skeleton, chained to the earthen walls with silver that glinted in the light, cold, cold.

"Let me *out*—"

Jonas stood above him. "The body is mine," he said slowly, triumphantly. Johnny could see that he had already begun to change. The snout was bursting from flaps of human skin . . . the eyes were narrowing, changing color.

Desperate, Johnny beat against the wall of his prison. And Jonas cackled. His laughter was already transforming itself into an inhuman howling.

Speranza watched the boy as he slept. The moon was rising. She had half believed the Count's insane suggestion that the boy would now transform into a wolf . . . but he lay peacefully, his eyes closed, curled up on a woollen blanket.

Speranza watched the moon. She knew she would soon go to him. Since crossing the Austro-Hungarian border she had felt dread and desire in equal measure. They were moving into a thick forest. Bare trees, their branches weighed down with icicles, obscured the moon. The train rattled and sighed and seemed almost to breathe. She steadied herself and watched the trees go by. Soon, she thought, I will lose the child . . . I will be free of these madmen. What then? Obscurity in Aix-en-Provence?

The boy stirred. He moaned. Beneath closed eyelids, his eyes moved feverishly. She touched his hand. Recoiled. The hand was burning. Burning! It must be a fever, she thought. And remembered little Michael's consumption once more. Gingerly she touched his forehead. It was drenched with sweat. She shook him. He would not waken. "Johnny," she whispered, "Johnny,"

He moaned.

"Johnny!" Why am I panicking? she thought. This dread is quite unreasonable . . . I must cool his brow.

She opened the door of the compartment. The servant girl who had looked after Johnny before was sleeping in the corridor. She awoke instantly. "I am sent . . . by the Count, gnädiges Fräulein."

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The Count. . . .

"Has he done something to the boy?" Thoughts of cruel scientific experiments . . . potions in the food . . . mesmerism . . . "Fetch some water. Quickly."

"Jawohl, gnädiges Fräulein." The maid hurried down the narrow walkway. Speranza watched her disappear. Wind from an open window whipped at her and left sprinkles of snow on her black dress. She was still wearing the necklace of silver and amethysts.

She expected the maid to return any moment. Time passed. A powerful odor was wafting into the corridor . . . the reek of animal urine. She heard a trickling sound from within the compartment. The poor child, she thought. He is wetting himself. She went back in.

She looked at him in the moonlight. His nightshirt was stained. The urine was running onto the floor of the compartment. His eyes were darting back and forth beneath squeezed lids. His whole body was slick with sweat. She held a handkerchief over her nose, but still the stench was suffocating. Where was the maid? Could they not understand that the boy was sick? She went out into the corridor once more. The cold blasted her. The dread came again, teasing at her thoughts. The maid, she thought, the maid. . . .

"At last!" she cried, seeing the girl come back. She was clutching something in her arms . . . a small bottle and a book . . . a Bible, Speranza saw. "I sent you to get water!"

"Holy water," the maid whispered. The terror in her face was unmistakable.

"What's the matter with you?" said Speranza angrily. "Come inside and help me with the child." She went back into the compartment and put her arm under the boy's neck to lift him into a sitting position. The boy was limp, lifeless-seeming.

The maid stood at the door.

"Come and help me—"

The girl made the sign of the cross and looked down at the floor. The train rocked and clattered. The girl held out the holy water and the Bible—

"This is nonsense, purest nonsense!" Speranza cried. "Superstition and nonsense! This Count of yours has you all under the diabolical influence of his mad illusions . . . you must calm yourself, girl." How much did the servant understand?

"Ich habe Angst, gnädiges Fräulein."

"Stop chattering and—" She tried to seize the bottle from the girl. It smashed against the seat and broke. Still the boy slept. "You can see quite clearly that the boy is not a werewolf," Speranza said, trying to

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keep calm. "Stay with him. I'm going to bring the Count. We'll settle this matter once and for all. Stay with the boy, do you understand?"

The girl had thrown herself against the wall and was sobbing passionately. "What's the *matter* with you?" Speranza said. She was losing all patience now. It was one thing to take charge of a child for a few days . . . quite another to be made to cope with an entire trainload of madmen. The maid's hysteria grated on her ears. She could endure it no longer. She stalked out into the corridor and slammed the door of the compartment.

In that moment Jonas leapt into the clearing, seized control of the body, forced open the child's tired eyes, which glowed like fire in the light of the moon.

And howled.

Speranza felt the dread again. It must be the wind, she thought, the desolate relentless wind. It was howling down the hallway. The walls were damp, and snow glistened on the threadbare carpet.

She had to see him. She had to unmask his terrible deception, had to allay this dread that gnawed at her and would not release her . . . she made her way to the end of the corridor, stumbling as the train lurched. She opened the door.

The wind came, whistling, abrasive. She grasped a handhold. There was no one to help her step over the coupling mechanism, which groaned and clanked between the two cars. An animal's cry sounded above the pounding of the train and the clanging of the couplers. The forest stretched in every direction. They were moving downhill. She took a deep breath and skipped across, feeling frantically for a railing. The howling came again. So close . . . it almost seemed to be coming from the train itself and not the forest.

She peered into the Count's private car. Black drapes shrouded the window. "Let me in!" she cried, banging on the glass with her fists.

Abruptly the door opened. She fell into utter darkness.

She heard the door slam. She could see nothing. The air was close and foul. Even the clerestory windows had been covered up. "Count . . ." she whispered.

"You came."

His voice was changed. There was a rasp to it. She stood near the doorway. She could see nothing, nothing at all.

"Come closer, Speranza. Do not be afraid. The utter darkness does tend to impede the transformation a little. You see, I do have your interests at heart."

She hesitated. The stench filled her nostrils. Its fetor masked a more

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subtle odor, an odor that was strangely exciting. She backed against the door. The train's motion made her tingle. She was sweating. Still she saw nothing. But she could hear him breathing . . .

"You're driving the boy mad," she whispered. "Though it's true that I am being paid, I ought perhaps to dissociate myself from—"

"You did not come here to discuss business, Speranza. Am I wrong?"

The smell was seeping into her . . . she felt a retching at the back of her throat . . . and a stirring, a dark stirring beneath her petticoats . . . "No, Count—" she said softly, at last admitting her shameful desire to herself.

"Only the king wolf mates," said the Count, "and he takes for his consort a female from another tribe. . . ."

Something furry had reached up her skirts. It touched her thigh. It was searing hot. She whimpered. The hand stroked her, burned her . . . moved inexorably up towards her private parts . . . it caressed them now, and she cried out in pain, but there was pleasure behind the pain, and the warmth burst through her body as it shuddered, as it vibrated with the downhill movement of the train . . . "You must not . . . you ought not to . . ." she said . . . she felt something moist teasing at the lips of her vagina, and she felt her inner moisture mingling with sweat and saliva . . . I must resist him, she thought, I would be ruined . . . yet she made no move to escape, for the fire was racing in her nerves and veins. . . .

The hands roved, brutal now. Something lacerated her thighs . . . she moaned at the sharp pain . . . were they claws or hands? My imagination is running wild, she thought. The madness is infecting me. The cloth was tearing now. She felt hot blood spurting. "No," she said, trying to tear herself away, "no, don't hurt me." The Count did not answer her with words but with a growl that resonated against her sexual organs. She tried to inch away, but the hands gripped her thighs tighter. She could see nothing, nothing at all, but the railway car smelled of musk and mud and rotten leaves, the air was dank and clogged with the smells of rutting and animal piss . . . at last she managed to free herself. She groped along the wall . . . the wall was clammy, like a earthy embankment . . . her feet were sliding in damp soil. . . .

I'm dreaming! she thought. It's because of the darkness, I'm starting to imagine things—

Her hand touched something soft now. Curtains. I have to let in the light, she thought. She tugged at the velvet. A sliver of moonlight lanced the darkness and—

The Count's voice, barely human, "You should not have—not the light—I will change now—change—"

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The curtain fell away and the moonlight streamed in across glittering fields of snow. . . .

The Count . . . his face . . . his nose had elongated into a snout. Even as she watched he was changing. Bristles sprouting on his cheeks. His teeth were lengthening, his mouth widening into the foaming jaws of an animal. The eyes . . . bright yellow now, slitty, implacable. His hands, already covered with hair, were shrinking into paws. With a snarl the Count fell down on all fours. His teeth were slick with drool. The stench intensified. Her gorge rose. She tasted vomit in the back of her throat. Then the wolf leapt.

She was thrown back. She fell down into the patch of moonlight. The beast was ripping away her dress now. It still desires me, she thought. The wolf's spit sprayed her face and ran down her neck. She tried to beat it back but it straddled her now, about to sink its teeth into her throat—

It touched the silver necklace—

And recoiled, howling! Speranza scrambled to her feet. The wolf watched her warily. Where its snout had touched the necklace, there was a burn mark . . . an impression of the silver links in the chain. The wolf whined and growled. There was a smell of charred fur. Her heart beat fast. The trickling drool scalded her neck, her exposed breasts.

She found the door, flung it open, ran, clambered across to the next car, entered. As she slammed the door shut, she heard an anguished howling over the cacophony of steam and iron.

For a long moment she stood. The howling died away, or was drowned by the clatter of the train. She stood, her arms crossed over the front of her tattered chemise, the chill air numbing the places where the wolf's touch had seared her.

She touched the silver necklace. It was cool to her fingers. She thought: impossible, it's all impossible.

Could it have been done with conjurer's tricks? With pails of animal dung, with suggestive disguises, preying on a mind already primed to expect a supernatural metamorphosis? Moonlight streamed into the corridor. They were emerging from the forest now. There were mountains in the distance. In the middle distance was a church, enveloped in snow, its spire catching the cold light and softly glittering.

She thought of Johnny.

Whatever the Count was, he was trying to make Johnny into one, too. Perhaps it was all some inhuman scientific experiment . . . or some kind of devil-worship. Had Cornelius Quaid not spoken of mutilations and atrocities? The poor child!

I must steal him away, she thought. I cannot suffer him to remain here, succored by lunatics, a lamb amongst wolves!

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Perhaps they had done something to him already. . . .

She opened the door of the compartment.

Wind gusted in her face. The window had been smashed. The floor, the seats, were blanketed in snow. "Where is he?" she said.

She could not see the young maidservant. Only something lying on one of the seats, covered in a blanket. Much of the car was in shadow; perhaps the maid was lurking in a corner, ashamed of something she had done to the boy! But Speranza did not want to contemplate it. . . .

"Where is the boy?" Speranza said.

There was no answer.

"Where is he? He was entrusted to your care!"

Still there was no response.

"I have had enough of these enigmas!" Speranza said. Anger and frustration deluged her. She strode into the compartment, meaning to slap the servant's face.

Slowly the blanket slid away. Beneath it was a small boy, naked, disconsolately sobbing. There was blood everywhere; the seat looked as though it had been painted with it. It was clear that the maid had tumbled to her death—that is, if she had not been dead *before* she was cast out.

"Johnny!" She was too shocked to feel revulsion at first.

Slowly the boy's cries ceased. Slowly he lifted his head up. His mouth, his cheeks were smeared with blood, black in the silver moonlight. His hair was matted with it. He said, "I tried to stop Jonas from coming. I *tried*, Speranza. Oh, I didn't want you to know, I threw her out of the window, but I didn't have enough time . . . Oh, Speranza, it's hopeless, I'm never going to be like you and the other humans."

Speranza remembered what the Count von Bächl-Wölfing had said to her also: "Therefore, Speranza, I long for hope." She knew she could not abandon the boy now. Even though he had killed. It was a sickness, a terrible sickness. She swallowed her dread and allowed him to come to her arms. "Oh, Johnny, you must have hope!" she cried out.

"Yes, I must, mustn't I?" said the child. And he wept bitterly, as though the world were ending, the tears mingling with coagulating blood.

Speranza did not sleep at all that night. She held the child firmly to her bosom, and allowed him to sob until he was quite spent. Little Johnny trembled in her arms, and behind the clatter of the train and the wind whistling through the broken window pane she could hear a faint and plaintive howling from von Bächl-Wölfing's private car. She dared not close her eyes; no, she told herself, I cannot, not until I am sure that the moon has set behind those snowy mountains.

It was cold, unconscionably cold; but a feverish heat arose from the boy's body, and now and then he seemed different, his arms dangling at

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a strange angle, his nose oddly distended, his cheeks covered with silvery down. Each time she thought he had somehow transformed himself she would look away, her heart pounding; but when she looked back he was always a little child again. And she thought: I am mad, I am imagining everything. After some hours there came a dank odor of putrescence from the bloodstained seat. Speranza resolutely faced the shattered window, letting the fresh chill wind mask the faint stench of decay.

"There are no monsters," she whispered to herself over and over. "Only bad dreams."

And they reached Vienna the next morning, and drove to the Spiegelgasse in a carriage with an impressive-looking footman as their guide.

On the left, twin staircases led up to a baroque façade. There was a long line of carriages along the side of the street. Some were the ordinary station carriages; others were private, and blazoned with various emblems and insignia. One was an imported American Concord, and it was this one that bore the von Bächl-Wölfing arms. People were dismounting from their carriages and being escorted up the steps by footmen. The air was cloudy with horses' breath and rank with their manure; two brawny lads in uniform were sweeping dung off the snowy pavement, chattering to each other in some Slavic dialect.

"This is the residence of Dr. Szymanowski?" Speranza asked.

"Oh, no!" Johnny piped up. "This is the town house of that Count, the one who frightens me so."

"There is nothing to be afraid of. He is a very generous man."

For a moment Speranza panicked, thinking that the boy would once more attempt to baptize the Count's dwelling with urine. But there was no invasion from the mysterious Jonas, and the boy was nothing if not angelic—almost alarmingly so, Speranza thought.

The guide spoke. "Dr. Szymanowski comes from a little town in Poland—Oswieçim—Auschwitz, we call it in German—and the Count has graciously allowed him the use of an apartment in the town house, along with some basement space for his experiments. He's a harmless old fool, the doctor. Quite round the bend, I'm afraid. He is an expert, you know, in the . . . ah . . . in the mating patterns of wolves."

Speranza watched as the Count's guests ascended the steps. Each seemed more outlandish than the last. There was a turbaned gentleman now, whose silken garments, stitched with jewels, almost blinded her with their colors: turquoise, shocking pink, lemon, and pea-green. There was a ragged, stooped old woman who looked just like one of those operatic gipsy fortune tellers. There were elegantly dressed men, in top hats and opera cloaks, and there were those whose origins seemed less

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than aristocratic; but all were accorded equal deference by the Count's retainers.

They entered through the tradesmen's door, concealed from the street by the twin ornamental balustrades of the grand façade.

A kind of soirée was in progress; she and Johnny stood beside the grand doorway of the ballroom and listened to the chatter, the laughter, the strains of a string quartet. Was it her imagination, or was there mixed into that laughter a sound like wild wolves' howling? She beckoned to Johnny and, gripping his hand, stepped out into a vast ballroom, lit by glittering chandeliers, filled with guests in opulent clothes, decorated with marble statues and unicorn tapestries and pastoral paintings, permeated with the faint but insistent odor of canine piss. . . .

Johnny clutched her hand tightly as they stood beside the doorway. In her severe black dress, wearing the single strand of silver around her neck, Speranza had never felt more out of place. The guests paid her no regard at all; most were deep in conversation with one another, and a few stood next to the dais beside the French windows at one end of the ballroom, where the string quartet was performing, the four musicians immaculately dressed in tails, starched wing collars, hunched over their music stands. The French windows were shuttered, admitting neither fresh air nor evening light, and although the hall was spacious, the air was dank and close.

An old man in a dinner jacket stood aloof from the others. From the whispered remarks she overheard, she knew it must be Dr. Szymanowski—the man who, according to the Count, was the architect of some grand scheme that would transform the lives of all werewolves. . . .

She stood, a little embarrassed, not quite certain what she was expected to do. Presently one of the guests—the richly attired Indian whom she had seen enter the town house—accosted her. "Mademoiselle," he said, and continued in heavily accented German, "Sie sind also auch beim Lykanthropenverein—"

"I have no German," she said with a smile.

"Oh, I am jolly glad," he said. "It is good to be encountering a fellow subject of her Britannic Majesty, isn't it?" He surveyed her haughtily, twirling one end of his moustache as he spoke, and extending to her, with his other hand, an open snuffbox made of gold and inlaid with amethysts, emeralds, and mother-of-pearl. "You will perhaps be caring for snuff?" When she demurred, he clapped his hands and a little Negro boy, costumed in an embroidered silk tunic stitched in gold thread, sidled up to him and took the snuffbox from his hands. "Perhaps you will be preferring a cigarette? I know that amongst you people cigarettes are considered more becoming in a woman than the more vulgar incarnations

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of tobacco. But where we are going, cigarettes are very costly, so I understand."

"We are going—" She noticed that Johnny was sniffing the air and glancing shiftily from side to side, and held on to him even more tightly. "I am not quite sure what you mean."

"Ah, but let us not be speaking of the stark, pioneering future! Let us revel in our past while we may. I will jolly well be missing my homeland. You are, from your manner of dressing, an Englishwoman, isn't it?"

"I'm French actually. But I have lived in England. And this boy, who has at present been entrusted to my care, is English, as he will tell you himself."

"Nevertheless—for we cannot all be fortunate enough to be born beneath that destiny-laden Britannic star—I salute you, madam." He bowed deeply to her, and the peacock plumes that adorned his turban quivered. Johnny reached out and tried to touch them, and laughed when they tickled his fingers. "And, young sahib, I salute you most humbly. I am called Shri Chandraputra Dhar, and was once Lord High Astrologer to the Nawab of Bhaktibhumi, before I was sent away in disgrace and shame, for reasons which no doubt you will already have guessed."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Speranza said. They all seemed to assume that she was one of them, that she knew their secrets. Were they all mad?

The young Negro page reappeared as if by magic with a tray, some glasses of champagne and a small dish of caviar, and Chandraputra idly ran his finger through the boy's curls. "I no longer serve the Nawab, but his Grace the Count is being kind enough to allow me a position in his household, for which I am being most humbly and abjectly grateful. But you are doubtless understanding me when I say that blood is thicker than water, especially that blood that runs in the veins of those who walk between the two worlds. You will of course know this from your own experience, Miss . . ."

"Martinique," Speranza said. His talk of blood disturbed her. She remembered her dream of the river of blood. The air seemed thicker now, as though the ballroom somehow had been transported to the edge of a dark forest. "And the boy's name is—"

"James," the boy said distinctly. His manner of speaking was quite different from any she had heard him use before: refined, almost haughty, like that of a servant in a highborn household. "My name is James Karney, if you please, sir."

"Oh, nonsense, child!" Speranza said in exasperation. "Do excuse my charge, Mr. Chandraputra . . . we are both very tired from our journey across Europe, and young Johnny Kindred is very much given to make-believe—"

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"Ah! He is the one with many names!" said Shri Chandraputra. "Now I understand everything." To Speranza's amazement, the Indian fell on his knees before the child and gazed upon him with a humility that would have seemed comical were it not so full of earnest. He rose, grasped Speranza's hand fervently, and stooped to kiss it. His nose felt curiously cold against her hand, almost like a dog's. "You, madam, you, you . . . all our company is honoring you . . . you, *you* are, in all truth, the very Madonna of the Wolves incarnate! Ah, Countess, to have given birth to the one who will be a bridge between our two races . . . permit me to be the first to worship. Boy! Boy! Champagne, mountains of caviar! Or shall I be fetching the gold, the frankincense, the myrrh?"

"Surely, sir, you are making fun of me," Speranza said, laughing out loud at last, for the fellow was making an astonishing spectacle of himself. "This is no Christ, but a poor, half-crazed young child who cries out for affection; and I am no madonna but a mere governess in the Count's employ."

"Then you are not having the privilege of being the child's mother?" said Shri Chandraputra, raising one eyebrow skeptically.

"No," she said, "I am afraid that honor is not mine," and started to turn away.

She was not comfortable in his presence. But he was standing in between her and the doorway into the inner parlor. Since she could not retreat, she steeled herself and dived into the throng, seizing a glass of champagne from a passing footman as she did so. She saw the Indian whispering into the ear of another guest and pointing to her. A couple who had been waltzing stopped and stared with naked curiosity. Speranza turned and saw others pointing, tittering. The music was abruptly cut off as one of the guests rushed over to tell the latest gossip to the quartet players. Frantically she looked down at her dress, wondering whether she had accidentally exposed some part of her person.

For a few seconds there was no sound at all, and the guests stood stock-still, their jewels glittering, their eyes narrowed, like predators preparing to pounce.

The smell intensified. Sweet-sour fragrance of rotting leaves. A dank forest. The rutting of wild beasts.

Then she heard a whisper somewhere in the crowd: "Der Mond steht in einer halbe Stunde auf." And the others nodded to each other and slowly backed away from her. And glanced warily at each other, taking each other's measure, like fellow beasts of prey. And the Indian astrologer growled at her . . . growled, like an angry hound!

"Der Mond steht auf . . ."

Moonrise . . . in half an hour!

"A dance!" A woman in an embroidered gown stretched out her delicate

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arms and languorously shrilled: "A dance, my dears, before we all turn into ravening beasts!"

The string quartet, joined by a pianist, burst into a rhapsodic waltz, and all around Speranza guests formed couples and swept out to the center of the ballroom.

"Speranza, Speranza, I'm frightened!" Where was the voice coming from? She thought she saw the boy, scuttling behind a tall man who was doffing his hat to a petite old woman wrapped in a voluminous shawl. She made off in the man's direction, and he turned to her, smiling, his arm outstretched to invite her to the dance, and his teeth were white, and knife-sharp, and glistening with drool. . . .

"Speranza!" It was coming from somewhere else . . . from behind her. The music welled up, and with it the mingled smells of lust and terror. . . .

Where is the child? she thought. I must find the child, I must protect him from these madmen!

There he was, talking to Dr. Szymanowski . . . were her eyes deluding her, or was the professor's face becoming longer, his nose more snoutlike, his eyes more narrow and inhuman? His smile had become a canine leer, and the tufts of hair pushing up through his bald scalp—

No! She rushed to the boy's side and grasped his hand. His palm was bristly, hot. She pulled him from the professor's side. "We've got to get away from these people," she said. "Come on, Johnny. Please." I mustn't let my dread show, mustn't startle the child, mustn't provoke the monster inside him—

"I've killed Johnny forever, I'm with my own people now!" The boy's voice was deep and rasping. Dr. Szymanowski snarled at her, and she saw saliva running down his chin, which was sprouting dark hairs, and she held on to Johnny and elbowed her way through the guests as they danced frantically to the accelerating music, the jewelled gowns and the chandeliers whirled, she lashed out with her free hand and sent champagne glasses crashing onto the Persian carpet with its design of wolves chasing each other's tails in an infinite spiral—

"Speranza, I'm afraid—" Johnny's tiny voice was interrupted by the voice of the other: "Get back inside! It's not your turn anymore. Get back inside and let me kill the bitch!"

"Johnny!"

Shri Chandraputra Dhar had torn off his turban now and had dropped down on all fours. He was sloughing his face. He howled as though racked by the pain of childbirth. Pieces of flayed skin hung from his neck, his palms. Blood gushed from his eyes like tears. His nails were lengthening, his hands shrivelling into paws. Speranza could not move, though her heart was pounding, for there was in his transformation a fierce, alien beauty.

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The woman in the elegant gown screeched, "Oh, how tedious, my dears . . . it's that hotblooded oriental nature . . . even with the moon shut out he's off and howling. Oh, someone see to him before he sets everybody else off—" Her words trailed off into inchoate screaming, and fangs jutted from her moist, painted lips, and hairs were poking through her porcelain complexion—

Speranza ran, dragging the boy behind her.

Two footmen guarded the double oak doors that led to the vestibule. They bowed and let her through. The doors slammed shut behind them. Speranza was shaking. The boy wrested himself free of her grip and looked at her.

"Why are you taking me away from them?" he said softly. "I understand their language a little, I think. And I belong to them somehow." It was the voice of Johnny Kindred once again: always afraid, always a little child.

From behind the massive doors came howling, snarling, screeching, growling, to the accompaniment of passionate music. The vestibule was dark. A single candelabrum, at the foot of a sweeping staircase, flickered forlornly. The walls were hung with purple velvet drapes, and the floor was richly carpeted, siphoning away the faint sound of their footsteps.

And Speranza was at a loss to answer him. There was fear here; there was a palpable, brooding evil; and yet she too had felt the allure of darkness. She dared not remain, and yet . . . she thought of the times when, helping the Hon. Michael Bridgewater with his Latin verbs, or pouring tea at one of Lord Slatterthwaite's interminable garden parties, she had fallen into a reverie of thoughts too dark, too sensual to allow of public expression. Even then she had dreamed of being touched, in the midst of a primal forest, by a creature barely human, and of succumbing to a shuddering delight that was laced with pain and death. And she had thought to herself: I am vile, I am utterly without shame, to let such lewd thoughts surface in myself. She knew that it would be best to take the child away for ever. But the abyss at whose edge they both stood called out to them.

So she did not respond; she merely held the child close to herself. He seemed dazed. He moved, scratching her arms and drawing blood. She stared at his fingernails in the half-light. They had lengthened and crooked themselves into the shape of claws. But his face had not changed.

"We'll go away from here," Speranza said. "If you're away from these people, you'll not become one of them."

"Could it be so simple?" said the boy.

Ahead was the massive front entrance she had earlier seen from the outside; the doors, inlaid with ivory and gilt, were shadowed, and she saw only glimpses of the sylvan scene depicted on them.

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The doorknobs were the paws of wolves that faced each other in a contest of wills; in the meager light their eyes, which were cabochon topazes set into the wood, glowed with an intense ferocity. She backed away, still carrying the child in her arms.

Behind her: laughter, music, the howling of wolves.

Gingerly she touched the doorknob, turned it—

The portals swung open! Footmen stood on either side. And, framed in the doorway, tall, dark against the driving snow, his cloak billowing in the wind, stood the man she most dreaded: the man who had brought her to the brink of darkness, and who had awakened in her such unconscionable desires. . . .

"Speranza," he said. "I see you have decided to remain with us."

"Your guests—they are—they are changing—becoming wild animals—"

"Tush! Could they not wait for moonrise? Do they have so little self-discipline? They will destroy all that I have worked for! I begin to regret that I called together this gathering of the Lykanthropenverein."

"Lykan—" She had heard the word spoken many times now; it was one of those Germanic portmanteau words, and she had paid it little regard. But now she looked at him questioningly, and he responded:

"The Society of Werewolves, my dear Speranza. Of which I find myself, by right of single combat, the Herr Präsident. Oh, it was stupid of me to arrange for the meeting at the Vienna residence . . . we could be seen, we could be noticed . . . far better to have the gathering at my estates in Wallachia . . . it was a silly gesture on my part, to encourage such openness, such ostentation!" The Count sighed. "But . . . you were on your way out, were you not, Mademoiselle Martinique?"

She summoned up her last reserves of defiance. "I cannot allow you or Dr. Szymanowski to take charge of this child, Count von Bächl-Wölfing. I apologize for my failure to perform my duties, and I shall attempt to repay your generous stipend when I have obtained some other employment—"

"Have you consulted the child?"

"No . . . but of course he doesn't want to stay here! He's a frightened little boy, a lamb amongst wolves. He needs tenderness and warmth, not your mad professor's bestial experiments!"

"Ask him."

"I don't need to ask him . . . I can see the terror in his eyes, I can tell by the way he clings to my side."

"Ask him!"

He clapped his hands. The doors slammed shut, and the footmen, holding their kerosene lamps aloft, entered and stood on either side of the

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Count. She heard a voice shriek out from the ballroom within: "Only one more minute until the fatal hour—only one more minute until moonrise!"

The boy extricated himself from Speranza's arms. In the lamplight he cast a huge double shadow against the velvet drapes. He shrank away from the Count; and yet there was in his eyes a certain awe, a certain love.

"Oh, Speranza, don't ask me to choose between you. Oh, Speranza, I do love you, but I have to stay, don't you see? I know that now." As he spoke the reek of canine urine became suddenly more powerful, choking her almost. And the boy spoke again, in the deep voice of Jonas: "He is my father."

"You see?" said von Bächl-Wölfing. "The child knows instinctively. Instinctively! He is my son, conceived on an English harlot in Whitechapel, raised in a madhouse, but my blood runs true—he has the eyes of the wolf, the senses, the memory; he knows me for what I am. And, since he has learnt to call me father, I acknowledge him, I embrace him as mine."

"You can't mean—" Speranza began, trying to shield Johnny from him with her arms. But the boy himself pushed her brusquely aside. His eyes glowed now. The feral odor became more rank, more suffocating.

The Count spread his arms wide to receive the child. With halting steps the boy came forward. Through the stained glass moon above the door, Speranza could see the rising of the real moon, pale and haloed by the icy air. The Count's cloak flapped as the wind gusted around it.

The boy stood close to the Count now, dwarfed. The Count enfolded him in the cloak. Speranza cried out the boy's name, but her voice was lost in the wind's howling and the cacophony from the ballroom. . . .

The Count looked longingly into her eyes. His gaze mesmerized her; she could not move. There was in it a kind of love. The Count advanced toward her, and already his lips were being wrenched apart as the wolf's jaw began extruding itself from within. As she stood transfixed, he began to court her in Italian: "Come sei bella, fanciulla; come sei bella, o mia Speranza." The voice was harsh, guttural, a travesty of her native tongue . . . yet the wolf was wooing her, trying to make love to her. Her blood raced. Her skin tingled. A hand reached out to her from under the cloak: a twisted, furry hand. A claw grazed her cheek. She closed her eyes, shuddering, desiring yet loathing him. Her cheek burned where his paw had touched it. She did not retreat from him, for he held the child captive still, and she told herself that to effect the child's rescue from this brutish destiny must be a sacred task for which she must sacrifice what small chastity she could lay claim to. She met his gaze with defiance.

"I'll save him yet . . . somehow. . . ."

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"Will you, my Madonna of the Wolves? I have a fancy to make you one of us this very moment. A bite from me should suffice. Or else I could force you to drink the dew that has formed in one of my footprints; we keep phials of such precious fluids in this house for just such an occasion. Or perhaps you would care to wear the sacred pelt of my ancestors, which being worn can be cast off only by death?"

"I could never become one of you."

His paw continued to stroke her cheek, drawing blood now. She shook her head, loosening the silver necklace from beneath her collar. The Count recoiled. His voice was barely human: "Consider yourself fortunate, mademoiselle, that you are wearing the necklace! The servants will show you to your room! You are safe until the next full moon!"

His forehead was flattening now, his brow creasing and uncreasing as bristles began to shoot out from folds of skin. He howled, and a uniformed servant emerged from an antechamber, lantern in hand.

"If the gnädiges Fräulein would care to follow me," he said, bowing deeply.

She hesitated. She was about to protest when the Count cast aside his cloak and she saw the wolf cub leap from his arms, and she knew that Johnny was beyond help, that night at least. In the morning she would see what could be done with him. She could not abandon the boy now, never, never.

From her little room—a garret, more or less—in the attic of the von Bächl-Wölfing town house, Speranza was able to see the street below and the private park, for the snow had abated a little and the moon was full. From below there came howling: not the cacophony she had witnessed in the ballroom, but something far more purposeful. First came a single note, drawn out, with an almost metallic resonance. Then another joined in, on another pitch, stridently dissonant with the first; then came a third and a fourth, each adding a note to the disharmony. The window rattled. Her very bones seemed to feel the vibration.

The howling crescendoed. The floor trembled against her feet. The chair she sat in was shaking. And suddenly it was over. She heard a slamming sound, and she saw the wolves pouring out into the street. They streamed past the row of parked carriages. She was glad none of the horses had been left outside.

When they howled they had seemed hundreds, but now she saw there were only perhaps twenty. They stood, still as statues, for a few moments, in the middle of the alley, their breath steaming up the air. Snow flecked their pelts. Their leader's fur was black and streaked with silver just as the Count's hair was . . . and beside him stood a young pup, the very one she had seen leaping out of the Count's opera cloak . . . and behind them

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other wolves. Even from this far up she could see how their eyes glowed. The moon was low, and the wolves cast giant shadows across the wrought iron angel gates of the park. The leader shook the snow from his fur and looked from side to side. Then they moved. Sinuously, with an alien grace, almost as one. A sharp bark from their leader and they began to trot down the Spiegelgasse. Quite silently, for the deep snow muffled the patter of their paws. At the corner, the wolves turned and vanished behind a stone wall.

She watched a while longer. But at length she was overcome by an intense weariness, and went to her bed. Her sleep was fitful, for she dreamt of the forest, and the river, and the lupine lover waiting for her at its source.

The wolfling sniffed the chill air and shook the snow out of his pelt. At last he had quelled the rebellion in his soul . . . at last he was as he was meant to be: proud, ferocious, one with the darkness. He was unsteady on his feet at first. But he imitated his father's gait and soon fell into its liquid rhythm.

The wolves moved silently. Now and then the wolfling's father paused to mark his scent, arrogantly lifting his leg to urinate on some memorable spot: a stone, a brick wall, the wheel of a cart. They spoke a language of the dark: now and then with a whine or a bark, more often with a quick motion of the head or a quiver of a nostril or a glance.

"My son," said the leader with his eyes, as the pack slipped into the shadow of another alley. "My son. How much I rejoice that I have found you . . . and that you are truly one of us, able to change . . ."

"Why did you not seek me out before?" the wolfling cried out with a shrug and a circular motion of his paws.

"Because," said his father, lashing the snow with his tail, "I was afraid. Your mother was not one of us."

"My mother. . . ."

There was another voice within the wolfling's mind, a voice that seemed to cry out: No, I am not one of these . . . I am a child, a human.

Whose was this inner voice? The young wolf followed his father, faster now, darting from shadow to shadow. The voice distressed him. It did not belong here. It was good to be this way. Good to paw the ground and sniff the air. The air was vivid: he could smell the blood of distant prey, racing, already sensing death. The inner voice spoke again, saying, This vision is bleak, gray, colorless . . . but the wolfling did not understand what the voice meant, for his eyes could not see color, only infinite gradations of light and shadow. And the possessor of the inner voice could not seem to grasp the richness of sound and scent he was experi-

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encing, but continually bemoaned the absence of this thing he called color.

He pushed the voice further back into his mind. It was a useless thing, a vestige of some past existence. He followed his father. The pack had split up now. There were the two of them, hunting as father and son.

Hunting! For the pit of his stomach burned with an all-consuming hunger. Not only for fresh, warm meat, but for the act of killing. . . .

Abruptly his father stopped, cocked his head. The wind had dropped. The snow fell straight down. Footsteps, human footsteps. He smelled blood: sluggish blood, tainted with the sour smell of wine. "Come, my son," his father said with an imperious bark. "We will celebrate together, you and I, the mystery of life and death. The quarry is nigh."

He saw nothing. They did not move. The smell came closer. There was a shape to the smell, a two-legged shape. He stood beside his father, tense, waiting. A second shape, much smaller, beside the first. What were they doing in the cold, in the dark? His father growled . . . a faint, ominous sound, like a distant earth tremor.

The snow thinned and the young wolf saw more. The quarry was on the steps of a church. There was a woman and a child, perhaps four or five years old. A half-empty bottle lay next to them. There was a small puddle of wine on the snow. They were shivering, huddled together under a man's greatcoat.

The woman was muttering to herself in some Slavic tongue, and rocking the child back and forth. She wore a woolen shawl; beneath it he could see wisps of gray hair. She had a drawn, pinched face. The child was sullen, distracted. He could not smell what sex the child was; it was too young.

"They are street people," said the wolfling's father. "They have strayed from the herd. They have sought the desolation of the cold and dark. They belong to us."

And loped up the steps, his jaws wide open, while his son followed closely behind.

At first the woman did not even seem to notice. The wolf circled her several times. Then he pounced.

She let go of the child. The child began to whine. Its scrawny shoulders showed through the torn nightshirt. It began to clamber up the steps towards her. The wine bottle rolled away, chiming as it hit each step. The wolfling watched his father and the woman. For a few seconds they gazed at each other, neither of them moving, oblivious to the bawling of the child. In those moments it seemed almost as though they were exchanging vows, each choosing the other as partner in the ritual of death.

Then his father leapt. He tore out her throat with his jaws. There was

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an eerie whistling as the wind left her. The child, crying, was pummeling at the wolf's side with its fists, but the wolf ignored it. The woman's shawl, pinned between her torso and the steps, fluttered in the wind.

The wolfling smelled the child's fear. It maddened him. He rushed at the child. The child's eyes widened. It backed away, up the steps. Then it turned and began to run. The wolfling followed. The child's blood smelled warmer than the woman's.

There was a door at the top of the steps. The child pounded at it with tiny fists. It did not budge. The wolfling jumped up, clawing at the nightshirt, gouging out great gashes in the child's chest and arms. Suddenly the door gave way. A rusty bolt, perhaps. The child ran inside. Through the rips in the nightshirt the wolfling saw its tiny vulva, and knew its gender for the first time.

He smelled incense. And dust. And sweet fragrance of over-varnished, rotting wood. In the distance there was an altar. A painted stone Pietà stood guard in the antechapel. There were candles everywhere.

The girl ran. He followed the sound of her footsteps, shoeless on the stone floor. She was hiding somewhere among the pews. She was panting. He could smell her exhaustion, her desperation. It was only a matter of time. He felt his heart pounding. He heard her heartbeat too, and paused to pinpoint it.

There! He scurried down the aisle. She was under the altar. He ripped the altarcloth with his jaws and found her huddled, clasping a leg of the altar, sobbing. Roughly he threw her down, hulking over her, teasing her face with his tongue and the edges of his teeth, urinating on her to show his possession. And gazed at her, as he had seen his father gaze into the eyes of the woman.

He saw her fear. And behind her fear he saw something else, too . . . a kind of invitation . . . the dark side of desire. He sensed that what they were doing together, hunter and quarry, was a sacred thing, a dance of life and death. The girl trembled. Pain racked her body. He spoke to her in the language of the forest, asking her forgiveness; and she answered in the same language, the language that men believe they have forgotten until such moments as these, giving him permission to take her life.

He was about to tear her apart when a long shadow fell across them both. He looked up and saw his father. Blood dripped from his jaws. There was a trail of blood from the antechapel all the way up the nave. His eyes glowed. His breath clouded the musty air.

"Now," said his father. "Kill. Feel the joy. Feel the spurting blood. Bathe in its warmth."

"I feel no joy," the wolfling said, "only a strange solemnity. I feel a kind of kinship with her."

"Good! You understand the law of the forest well, my son! Men see us

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as unreasoning, ravening beasts, but that is not all we are. We are not simply Satan's children. There are some of us to whom the killing is nothing more than the exercise of lust. Perhaps most of our little society are like that. But with you it is something more. Good. You are truly my son. To lead the Lykanthropenverein you must be more than a crazed creature of death . . . you must also feel a certain love for your victims. Now kill quickly. Shock her nervous system so that she will no longer feel pain."

The wolfling bent over the girl, ready to despatch her. Then he heard the inner voice: "Get away! Go back into the darkness! I want the body!" There were several other voices, too. Voices of humans. There was a mutiny going on inside his mind! The other personalities were seizing control! He struggled. But he was losing his grip. The girl was fighting him. And there was something going wrong with the vibrant layers of scents and fragrances around him . . . he was losing his sense of smell . . . the shapes were shifting too, darkening, becoming fringed with garish *colors*. . . .

Johnny Kindred snapped into consciousness beneath an altar inside a huge church, with a little girl in his arms. Her eyes widened. She began jabbering away in a foreign language. She pointed. There was a black wolf in the church. Staring at the two of them. Its fur was matted with bright red blood. Blood and drool dribbled from its teeth, which glistened golden in the candlelight.

"Jonas won't harm you," Johnny said to the girl. "I've sent him away."

The wolf growled. Johnny felt that he could almost understand what he was saying. If Jonas were nearby he could translate, but Jonas was being held down by the others. He was not being allowed to go anywhere near the clearing.

"The big bad wolf won't harm you," Johnny said, stroking the girl's curly hair, "he's . . . my father."

At dawn she drifted into sleep. And dreamed.

There was a forest. She ran among thick trees. She wore no corsets, no confining garments. Her hair was long and free to fly in the hot wind. She was naked but she felt no guilt because she was clothed in darkness. The air reeked of a woman's menses. Her feet were bare. They trod the soft earth. Moist leaves clung to her soles. Twigs lacerated her arms, her thighs, but the pain was a joyous pain, like the pangs of a lascivious passion. Worms crawled along her toes and tickled them and made her laugh. She laughed and her laughter became an animal's howling.

The primal atmosphere put her in mind of a witches' sabbath, or perhaps one of those bacchanalian orgies of the ancient Greeks, with the

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wild women who used to dance around and tear wild animals to pieces with their bare hands.

A brief memory surfaced: she was helping young Michael Bridgewater with his Euripides one day, only to come across passages which she could not in all decency translate . . . at least not into English, for in that language things that could be made to sound elevated in Italian or French were rendered intolerably crude. It was this enforced crudity, she had reflected at the time, that gave the English their preoccupation with prurience. And then they had lowered young Michael into the ground and it seemed as though it had not stopped snowing, as though she'd never escape the snow, not even by fleeing across half Europe. . . .

Here there was no snow.

No snow at all. There was moisture that dripped from the branches overhead, that oozed out of the earth, that was wrung out of the very air. The ground was slippery. She slid, glided almost, cried out with childish delight as the very earth seemed to carry her along. And always came that pungent scent of menstrual blood.

Light broke over leaves streaked with black and silver. Moonlight over a stream. She sat at the edge, bathing her feet. The water warm, like fresh blood . . . the ground trembling a little, with the regularity of a heartbeat . . . and she heard the cry of a wolf, distant, mournful. The sound was both repulsive and somehow alluring. She knew it might well be a love song, if she could but understand its language. . . .

And in the dream she knew, as by a profound inspiration, that the howling came from the waters' source. The beast was waiting for her upstream. And that she was drawn to the beast as the beast was drawn to her. . . .

And when she awoke she saw the Count von Bächl-Wölfing standing at the foot of her bed, and the boy beside him, clutching his cloak, as the rays of dawn broke through the high window.

The Count said: "Speranza, these are the last days of the old world. You know why we have gathered here. Dr. Szymanowski's grand scheme is this: in the spring we, the werewolves, will travel to America. There is wilderness there. There is ample food—thousands upon thousands of acres of land untouched by civilization, where only the savages live, and they will be our quarry. We will build our own kingdom, our private paradise. We will hunt by night and by day we will sing songs. America will be our utopia and you will be its queen, my Madonna of the Wolves."

She had sworn to herself that she would never leave the child. Now she understood at last all that that meant. She had been chosen. Beneath her black dresses and austere demeanor, she too harbored a beast within. A passion that could only be slaked by darkest love.

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"The boy has no mother now," said von Bächl-Wölfing. "And he has come to love you."

"And I him," she said.

"We must guard him well. He is a completely new kind of child—he is very special—the first link between my kind and your kind. You understand that, don't you."

"It is a pity about his mother. . . ." He did not look at her, and she got the impression that he was remembering some past unpleasantness. "Some of the wolves think of him as a savior, a redeemer. Because he is a link between the two species—proof that we are of man, and man is of us. That's the real reason I want to go to the New World. A new world for a new idea—a new world for a new kind of being—a bridge between the natural and the supernatural, between the divine and the animal within us."

She took the child to her bosom, and embraced the Count, whose cloak enveloped the three of them, and said, "I will."

Only the king wolf mates, and he takes for his consort a female from outside his tribe. . . . ●

NEXT ISSUE

Once again it's Christmastime, and our December issue features the traditional Christmas story—in fact, it features *three* of them. First **Michael Swanwick** takes us to a far planet for a night of wild adventure and sinister alien menace, as well as one of the strangest Christmas celebrations you'll ever experience, in our evocative December cover story, "A Midwinter's Tale." From deep space, **Cherry Wilder** takes us to an impoverished post-World-War II Germany and serves up a bone-chilling Christmas ghost story, as she discloses the eerie secrets of "The House on Cemetary Street." Then **Dean Whitlock** treats us to a Christmas ghost of a very different kind, in a lyrical tale of a strange encounter on a very special "Winter Solstice."

We turn away from seasonal locales for the rest of our December issue: multiple Hugo-and-Nebula winner **Orson Scott Card** takes us to an alternate 1800s Ohio, the milieu of his reknowned story "Hatrack River," for a fascinating look into the life of a most peculiar kind of "Dowser"; **Esther M. Friesner** returns after a very long absence with a story that gives us a *very* different perspective on the familiar legend of the Once and Future King, in the hilarious "Wake-Up Call"; new writer **R.V. Branham** makes a brilliant *IAsfm* debut with a wry and bittersweet study of how a "Lady with Teddy Bear" copes with the Mean Streets of near-future Los Angeles; and new writer **Lisa Mason,** who made her own *IAsfm* debut here only a few months ago, also takes us to near-future California, but to San Francisco rather than Los Angeles, and knocks the whole damn place flat, as the Big One comes at last, in the taut and hard-edged thriller "Deus Ex Machina." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our December issue on sale on your newsstands on October 18, 1988.

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ON BOOKS by Norman Spinrad

NEW AND INTERESTING

Recently I received a letter from the French science fiction magazine *Antares* asking me to comment on a piece they had published by Harry Harrison, the gist of which was that "every year there are fewer interesting (SF) novels being written, fewer novels with original ideas, fewer novels that are worth reading," and that "the leading role of Anglo-Saxon SF has ended because it cannot offer anything new and particular to the world SF scene any more."

Well, this is far too sweeping a statement and far too huge a topic to deal with here and now, but one further thing that Harrison said would seem to be capable of reasonably brief and specific discussion, namely that "Among the newer writers the few with any talent are not original in the slightest."

One can certainly understand from whence Harry Harrison's gloomy assessment of the state of the field derives, for he also points out that "There is a new (SF) novel published for every day of the year," and that is in fact an understatement. The figure is more like 500 than 365. And even in the best of worlds, Sturgeon's law is bound to apply to such a massive production. Fifty interesting, original, and well-crafted SF novels published in one year would be an unprecedented explosion of creative energy, meaning that even if we *were* experiencing such a quantum leap in the quality of what was being written, the other ninety percent, or about 450 novels a year, would *still* be crap.

And those fifty jewels would *still* be buried in a gigantic dungheap.

The expansion of SF publishing is a market-driven phenomenon. If SF books didn't move off the racks, they wouldn't have the rackspace that they do, and if they didn't have the rackspace, publishers wouldn't be publishing so many of them. At point of sale, all the publishers are competing for rackspace; they all want to keep the slots they have and ideally get more of them. No one is about to let a slot go empty for a month for fear of losing it.

Meaning that the number of books a publisher puts out a month is governed by the number of rackspaces they have to fill, not by how much worthy SF they have in inventory. If a publisher has five SF

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slots a month to fill, they *will* publish five SF books, no matter how low, literarily speaking, they have to stoop to fill out the bottom of the monthly list.

And that is admittedly pretty low these days. Publishers, not content with the natural production of mediocrity that pours in over the transom, have reduced SF to literary television by artificially creating made-to-order bottom slot fillers in the form of shared-world anthologies, "braided novels," continuations of dead authors' popular series by other writers, rented-out universes, and even super-star created series formatted by packagers and churned out episode after episode by diverse hungry wage-slaves.

In the past, bottom slots were filled by first novels, collections, anthologies, and reprints; books that were relatively cheap to purchase, and that were therefore able to break even on relatively small distributions.

But now there are many more bottom slots that need filling, publishers have discovered that even bad original novels sell better than good collections or reprints, and so they manufacture brand-name product to fill them—novels and shared-world anthologies churned out regularly to format, and ideally with a Big Name prominently displayed on the cover as the series creator, more often than not in bigger type than the episode writer.

One editor even gave me a horrifyingly idealistic rationale for reaming this stuff out. Namely that he *knew* that the bottom slot book would lose money, so he manufactured product he had no emotional involvement with to fill it, for fear that if he didn't he would injure a fledgling of promise's career by sacrificing a good first or second novel as gunfodder in the rackspace wars.

Needless to say, not all editors are quite this literarily scrupulous, and so many good novels, and particularly many early good novels, are pumped out into a vacuum for six weeks, and then disappear from view before word of mouth or reviews have a chance of connecting them to readers who would enjoy them.

Good first, second, and third novels by developing writers are competing with series format product down there in the lower racks, and by and large they are losing.

How could it be otherwise? Series format books are *designed* to sell, meaning that they build an audience through consistent repetition of the same identification figures, and frequently manage to feature on the cover a Big Name who is not the actual writer.

How can a free-standing novel by a talented beginner hope to compete on even terms with a money-making machine like this? By and large it can't, and half the time such writers end up writing episodes themselves in order to survive.

When it comes to the top names in the field, SF publishing has long

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since advanced to the point where *their* novels, successful or otherwise, are not buried in the dungheap, but first novelists, or even writers with two or three books under their belts, have a great deal of difficulty getting their books noticed before they go off sale. And so they drift into writing for book series themselves, or go get a job, or starve.

Which is not to say I entirely agree with Harry Harrison that no good science fiction novels are being written or that few of the newer writers have talent and almost none originality.

When it comes to work by established prominences, I think I have found about as much to praise as to condemn, though of course I make no pretense to read *everything*. If Harrison does, I can certainly see where he gets his impression since we have certainly seen an abundance of prominent stinkers.

And when it comes to the newer writers, I think that the problem is that some of the best of them have been rendered semi-invisible by the publishing realities.

A very few like William Gibson shoot immediately to the top with a superstar turn the first time out. Some, like Kim Stanley Robinson and Lucius Shepard, were patient enough to establish their reputations with a long string of fine short stories before publishing novels. The Ace Special Series has long been dedicated to giving first novels the best possible launch, and discovery series by Isaac Asimov and Ben Bova are trying to solve the problem by publishing first novels under a Big Name aegis.

But that leaves a good many early novels by promising writers hanging out there in obscurity, and that in turn creates the impression that there is a paucity of good new writers. It's not that they're not there, it's that most of us haven't noticed them.

Lucius Shepard, William Gibson, and Michael Swanwick come readily enough to most people's minds as hot young Turks, but how many people have heard of Victor Koman, Richard Kadrey, David Dvorkin, Paul Park, or Michael Blumlein?

Yet all of them have published excellent early novels of late, and collectively they demonstrate that there is still plenty of originality and diversity bubbling up from the ranks of the beginners.

Richard Kadrey's *Metrophage* was the only novel of this group to be published in one of the first novel series, as an Ace Special. It has been put down in certain quarters as "pseudo-cyberpunk" and imitative of Gibson's *Neuromancer*, which is to say that certain of the small group of writers who self-consciously consider themselves part of the "Movement" do not consider Kadrey a member of the club.

This sort of silliness has also been aimed at Walter Jon Williams for *Hardwired* and *Voice of the Whirlwind*, two fine novels, and it's about time it was laid to rest. I

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mean, come on guys, you can't have it both ways; if you want to be an influential movement, you're hardly in a position to complain when people are *influenced*.

Not that there are not certain congruences between *Metrophage* and *Neuromancer*. Both are set in a somewhat rundown future. Both are told from a streetwise point of view and in styles that owe a lot more to William Burroughs than to Edgar Rice. Both are heavily into the details of their settings' quotidian technology. Both have an implied political stance somewhat to the left of Robert A. Heinlein.

But there the congruences end. *Neuromancer* roams the globe and ventures into space, but *Metrophage* sticks strictly to a future Los Angeles. The cultural extrapolation of the future of *Neuromancer* is rather apolitical, in the sense that we get no real picture of the macropolitics of the era, but Kadrey gives us a detailed picture of a world where America is in decline and the Arabs are in the ascendance, and he does it by bringing this altered political reality down to streetlevel Los Angeles. Kadrey's hero, Jonny, is certainly no technowizard Neuromancer, he's a bad-ass street-person with hidden powers and identities.

Then too, *Metrophage* has a connectivity to place not in evidence in *Neuromancer*. Gibson does a fine job of evoking diverse imaginary settings, but Kadrey clearly has an emotional connection to Los Angeles, a real stake, on some level, in its future, and so he portrays that future with the realistic specificity of a Raymond Chandler but also with a genuine speculative passion.

Indeed, passion is what most deeply distinguishes *Metrophage* not only from *Neuromancer* but from the general run of science fiction novels. Gibson's characters are not emotionally flat, but Kadrey's characters are for the most part passionate idealists warped but not broken by the extremities of their existence. And while Gibson maintains a measured distance from his characters that works well for him, with Kadrey one gets the feeling that he is right down there in the emotional trenches.

Not that he loses control, for another thing that distinguishes *Metrophage* is the well-maintained balance between passion and control, not to mention a sense of irony. This is a fast-paced, hard-edged novel with plenty of nasty action, but it and the characters do slide off now and again into more thoughtful self-contemplation, which is to say that they do have inner lives of some complexity.

The plot of *Metrophage* is far too complex and Byzantine to be well-served by any attempt at summary, all the more so because the story is character-driven. If it can be simply stated at all, it is the story of a street kid's evolution into a mature being under severe evolutionary pressure.

As for the specifics of that evo-

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lutionary pressure, suffice it to say that the story takes place entirely in a Los Angeles economically on its ass like the rest of the United States, and carved up into petty interpenetrating fiefdoms, many with their own little armies of crazies, and none of them really restrained by a higher authority that is too busy with equally degenerate world politics.

So what we have here is Los Angeles as Beirut and then some, as the setting for a story in which local events are in the end being manipulated by higher unsavory sources, even as Lebanon has become a gameboard for the heavy players. One can well imagine the complexities of the double and triple dealing, the plots and counterplots, the betrayals within betrayals, generated by such a set up, and the writhings of this world of ruthless intrigue are the plot of *Metrophage*.

They drive the story, and they keep it fast-moving and intricate, but what you really come away from the novel with is a fascinating picture of an altered world and a very different Los Angeles, surprisingly different in some aspects, relentlessly inevitable in others, and densely populated by a kaleidoscopic torrent of bizarre yet quite feelingly rendered characters whose gut-level interactions have the feeling of real if superheated life.

Metrophage may not be anything conceptually original in a conventional science fictional sense— indeed, its central McGuffin pays open homage to an old *Outer Limits*—but it is original in the texture of its construction and the emotional sophistication of Kadrey's writing, and that is certainly enough to make it well worth reading.

The Jehovah Contract by Victor Koman, on the other hand, is conceptually audacious to the max. A down-at-the-heels hitman accepts a contract on God. Somehow I don't think that this is a concept that has exactly been overworked in the literature.

Coincidentally, or perhaps not so coincidentally, this is another novel set in a decayed Los Angeles, this one not nearly as far gone as Kadrey's, except in certain neighborhoods, meaning that it is much closer to the current real thing. There seems to be something about Southern California that makes it an ideal setting for this sort of thing. Move a bit south of LA and you are into Philip K. Dick and K. W. Jeter country. Crank it back in time, and you get something like Raymond Chandler. In some weird way, Southern California has always been a kind of ruin of the future, the American Dream machine decaying along its leading edge.

Be that as it may, Koman seems to be deliberately playing with the notion that he is connected to some Chandleresque hard-boiled tradition, and if he isn't quite playing it for straightforward comedy, he is playing it for tone, which is breezy without being satiric.

On the other hand, how else

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could you chronicle the adventures of an assassin out to plant God with a pair of cement overshoes? One might think the only alternatives would be mystical tendentiousness or all-out farce, but Koman opts for hard-boiled but far from humorless realism, a hard line to walk, but one which he manages to stay on nearly till the end.

He does this by writing the whole novel from the first person viewpoint of Dell, his hard-boiled, worldly-sophisticated, ironic, and most sympathetic hitman. By narrating the bizarre events through this serious-minded but wisecracking pragmatic viewpoint, he gives his totally outrageous premise the feel of science fiction, not fantasy.

And the Los Angeles setting certainly helps. Los Angeles is already full of all sorts of outré religious cults, instant mystic fads, larger than life media freaks, and general nuthouse behavior, and we have been sufficiently conditioned to the hard-boiled dick convention so that a hitman searching for a means to snuff God in this milieu, amidst gangsters and gurus and exotic weirdos, is something we just might believe is happening right now. Indeed, I live there, and I'm not so sure it isn't.

Only towards the end does the novel dissolve towards the theocratic sermonizing whose danger is so inherent in this material. God, it turns out, is a bad old male chauvinist pig whose ouster of the Goddess from the center of mystical power is responsible for the mess the world is in. That's why the Good Witches of the West have put out a contract on the Old Geezer, and this becomes a vehicle for a bit too much feminist theocratic revisionist speechifying, though the novel does end with a nice burst of action rather than a symposium, and Koman does give the triumph of the Goddess a nice little nasty ironic twist in the coda, which preserves *The Jehovah Contract* from degenerating into a male feminist screed.

That flaw aside, *The Jehovah Contract* would certainly fulfill Henry Harrison's criteria for an original concept presented by a newer writer of talent in an interesting manner.

The Jehovah Contract was published in hardcover by Franklin Watts and so was another of the novels under consideration, David Dvorkin's *Budspy*. Watts is a publisher new to the genre, which has been concentrating on hardcover reprints of paperback classics and books by new writers, which enables them to acquire quality work for relatively modest advances and get them some attention. In a sense, the editor, Charles Platt, has been resurrecting interesting bottom slot publishing with the old formula of quality reprints, adventurous first novels, and off-beat stuff the majors are afraid to touch, though he has yet to publish reprint anthologies. The modern twist on this hoary publishing strategy is that he is doing it in *hardcover*. At these

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advance levels, modest print hardcovers are commercially viable, and if the book is good, there is always the chance of a nice paperback sale. As is so frequently true, interesting books are being published around the margins of the SF publishing machine.

I have never heard of David Dvorkin before, so I am assuming that *Budspy* is a first novel, but if it is, it reads like a first science fiction novel by someone who has written a lot of good fiction elsewhere.

Budspy is certainly not what you would call conceptually original. The basic premise is that the Nazis have won World War II and evolved a stable society which dominates the world. This, of course, has been done rather often, and done rather well by divers hands. There is Len Deighton's *SS/GB,* Sarban's *The Sound of His Horn,* Gregory Benford and Martin Greenberg's excellent anthology, *Hitler Victorious,* and of course the ultimate masterpiece of this genre, Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle.*

So Dvorkin's novel has some pretty heavyweight stuff to measure up against in terms of doing something new and interesting with this material. And for my money *Budspy* succeeds in more than holding its own in this company. When it comes to this theme, *Budspy* is superior to just about everything short of *The Man in the High Castle* itself.

In *Budspy,* the United States, and perhaps even Britain, did not apparently enter World War II, the Nazis conquered Europe, and Hitler died victorious in the successful battle of Stalingrad. Now, decades later, Germany dominates the world militarily, technologically, and in a certain sense aesthetically. These latter day Nazis are exploring space, pushing the Russians slowly backward into Asia, and building a world order which even its subject peoples tend to regard as superior.

Including Chic, the "Budspy" or "Budman" of the title, even though he is a Jewish American whose parents survived the concentration camps. Chic works for the American Ombudsman Commission, a kind of American Gestapo of a sort, set up at least ostensibly to ferret out thievery and corruption in the government.

Chic, the Budman, is an agent who assumes a false identity, is infiltrated into a target organization, gains the confidence of his colleagues, and then betrays the miscreants to the Commission, who usually snuffs them. As the novel opens, he has done this many times, become many people, caught many "criminals," and indeed has been at it so long and does it so well that he hardly has any base personality of his own. A "Method" superfink.

He is sent to Berlin as "Jesse Bourne" to ferret out a leak in the American Embassy, where he immediately becomes professionally and personally involved with the Gesipo (the latter day Gestapo), and particularly with Horst-Dieter, who becomes his friend, and

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Krista, who becomes his sometime lover.

These Gesipo agents know that he is an American Budspy, for the Commission and the Gesipo are both trying to plug the same leak, and they admire the mystique of the Budman, one good secret policeman to another.

In his workday identity as an Embassy clerk, Chic eventually enters into an affair with Judy, an anti-Nazi coworker, because she is a prime suspect, or so at least he convinces himself at first. As his emotional involvement increases, Judy eventually leads him to an anti-Nazi German guerrilla underground.

And all the while he has been hanging around with Horst-Dieter and Krista, close to the Nazi upper crust, going to all the A parties, and conducting a hot though strictly sexual affair with the formidable and beautiful Krista.

It would be doing the novel a disservice to detail the denouement of this situation, but its outlines are inherent in the complications, and so is the thematic center. Where do Chic's real loyalties lie? Does he have any? When he is forced to choose, which side is he on?

This again is in a certain sense familiar territory, but Dvorkin's Berlin certainly is not, and neither are his Nazis, and that is what gives Chic's existential dilemma poignancy and its resolution credibility and *Budspy* a dimension that few other works in this genre have.

For Dvorkin's Nazi Germany is *alluring*, to "Chic," to "Jesse,"and to the reader. In this world, the fantasy of Hitler and Speer has been translated from blueprints into massive gleaming marble and concrete. Von Braun's dream of space is being realized. The Jews, instead of being exterminated, have been shipped off to found an Israel that is a German client state. Hitler died in 1944, and this world was built by a fictitious and more moderate Nazi leadership.

Berlin is a huge clean modern city that works, in contrast to what Chic and the reader have seen in America. Its citizens do seem physically and psychically superior to Chic, and hence through his viewpoint to the reader, to the point where this American Jew begins wondering whether they really *are* the Master Race.

For what cannot be denied is that, as opposed to the Americans, these Germans really *have* gotten their national shit together.

Nor are Horst-Dieter and Krista quite your black and white Gestapo agents. He is a genuinely appealing character; affable, friendly, fun-loving, generous, even something of a free spirit. And while she is certainly a primo black leather Nazi princess in bed and professionally, she is at least a Nazi who knows how to boogie.

Of course, it is also true that they are a pair of ruthless secret policemen, that they are dedicated Nazis, and that the regime they serve, while evolved away from Hitler's

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extremities, is still a totalitarian fascism.

And that's what makes *Budspy* so original. Dvorkin manages to give us a *balanced* view of the Nazi mystique. He subtly gives us a perhaps somewhat uncomfortable understanding of its attractions as well as its horrors which raises our understanding of the real Nazi Germany to a new level. For after all, the central enigma of the Third Reich is not why we find its memory repellent, but how a whole nation could have been seduced by its charms.

Dvorkin's evolved Nazi Germany has genuine virtues. The most monstrous abuses are long past. It is the highest civilization on Earth in terms of science, technology, quality product, and even arguably art. It has a visionary space program. It has a real sense of national esprit sadly lacking elsewhere. These Germans are idealistic positive-thinking people with a faith in themselves that enables them to do great things.

But *Budspy* is certainly no apologia for Nazism. Horst-Dieter remains sympathetic throughout, but Krista is ultimately a monster, and the Nazi regime is revealed as something based on many layers of sublimated old deceits, beautiful and brilliant on the surface like Krista, but twisted and rotting beneath.

The genius of *Budspy* is that Dvorkin gives us both of these realities, gives us an evolved Nazi Germany that, like all evolved societies, is a mixture of vice and virtue, visionary impulse and decay, national pride and national guilt, good and evil. Making the trenchant point thereby that *no* culture is really a black and white cartoon reality.

This is scary stuff when it comes to Nazi Germany and particularly when Chic comes down on the side of doing his duty to the Commission and his Gesipo commitments. There is no morally clear denouement at the true end of the story.

Maybe it's too scary for Dvorkin himself. He seems to end the novel on this thematically inevitable note and then chickens out on it by appending three chapters from an entirely new viewpoint, that of Hildie, a woman Chic meets back in America afterward, from which vantage we are given a more pat and conventional moralistic second outcome.

This is a rather serious flaw in an otherwise masterful novel, not only because it bends the book away from its natural thematic closure, but because Dvorkin violates his own consistently set-up formal structure to do it. Bringing in a new viewpoint character three chapters away from the end of a novel told entirely through the viewpoint of a single protagonist is a formal breakdown that points rather jarringly at the forced plot logic that made the author do it.

But despite this flaw, *Budspy* is still one of the best explorations of a Nazi victor state that we have, and first novel or not, reads like

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the work of a writer of mature insight, moral subtlety, and no little sheer writing craft.

Michael Blumlein's *The Movement of Mountains* does not have the conceptual originality of *The Jehovah Contract* or the fine-detailing of *Metrophage* or the mature moral subtlety of *Budspy*. But it is an interesting and quite well-written fairly conventional first novel in story terms, and there would be nothing discreditable about that if it were nothing more.

But *The Movement of Mountains* is something more, a rather conventional science fiction story rendered fresh and different by the originality of the viewpoint character that Blumlein has created to tell it through.

Jules Ebert is a doctor on a fairly standard economically depressed Earth. His lover, Jessica, is a scientist who feels her career is going nowhere. So she takes a position on the planet Eridis and emotionally blackmails Jules into joining her.

There is a fungus that grows only on rocks deep in the caves of Eridis which is the source of a vital drug. The stuff is mined by the Domers, an artificially-created race; Jessica becomes a research scientist on Eridis and Jules becomes physician to the Domers.

The Domers have a life-span of only five years. They are the literal slaves of the company which owns Eridis, and they are fed through tubes which connect to their abdomens. They are considered dumb insensitive brutes with rudimentary intelligence and no emotional or sexual lives. They are cloned in vats and endure a life of hard labor. Their bodies deteriorate rapidly and by the time they are five years old, they are poor decrepit creatures in constant chronic pain.

At which point comes Festival, which the Domers are conditioned to believe is going to be their reward, and they march eagerly through a door into a chamber that they believe is going to be paradise. Instead, they are dissolved back into protoplasm, and siphoned back into the cloning vat to begin the next cycle of the endless dismal process.

Well, with a set-up like this, you can guess more or less what is going to happen, and you won't be disappointed. One way or another, the Domers are going to develop self-awareness and an angry knowledge of their own class self-interest. There will be a Domer revolt which will succeed if the author believes in a happy ending or fail if he is out to write a tragedy. This is an oft-told tale dating back at least as far as Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* Variants of it are to be found in Jack Williamson's *The Humanoids,* Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,* and even the film *Robocop*. Indeed, you could even argue that it is also the plot of Howard Fast's *Spartacus,* a historical novel about the revolt of the Roman gladiators.

Which is not to say you can't tell this story again and make it interesting or even original. The revolt

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of the androids can be a hoary SF cliche if it is simply used as a formula to generate an action adventure plot, but it is also a kind of science fictional thematic archetype, and if used as such, it can be the vehicle for all sorts of philosophical, moral, and spiritual explication of the human existential condition, as witness Dick, Capek, Williamson, Fast, and company. Including Michael Blumlein, who turns it into something original of his own by telling the story through the first person viewpoint of Jules Ebert.

Jules is, well, a fat slob. His enormous corpulence is not glandular but the product of grotesque food binging. As one might imagine, this limits his choice of sexual partners to those who are fixated on huge fat men as sex objects and whose neurotic needs sync with his own, which is a thumbnail description of Jessica.

Small surprise then that when schedule problems and time dilation effects put Jessica on Eridis years before Jules, he eventually learns that she has been getting it on with one of the Domers, the moral equivalent of duck-fucking from a company viewpoint.

For the caves of Eridis are cold, and the Domers have been designed huge and fat for insulation. For Jules, the Domers represent his own magnified ideal body image, for he revels in his own fatness, and his libido is fixated on it. And seeing as how Jessica was fixated on *him,* it is not so surprising that she could find a Domer sexually fascinating.

Other humans, it turns out, have been having sex with Domers too, since the innocent creatures may easily enough be turned into the slaves of any perverse fantasy. Through these sexual encounters, self-awareness is spreading through the Domers, and so, it turns out, is an Earthborn virus which confers a kind of group consciousness, something to which the Domers, genetically identical, are peculiarly susceptible.

Jules is not just a fat slob, he's a doctor, and a good one—something of a genuine scientist too. Moreover, neurotic though he is, he has considerable self-awareness and self-insight; an obsessive who *knows* he's an obsessive. And he is dedicated, if somewhat tormentedly, to his profession on a moral level.

So the story is told through the scientifically knowledgeable viewpoint of an obsessively involved participant, a highly neurotic but brilliant intellect evolving towards a mystical and fleshly apotheosis along with the Domers and eventually humanity via the spread of the psychically mutagenic virus. The story unfolds on a deep personal level and is driven by complex lusts and passions, but on the scientific level Blumlein is formidable too, at least when it comes to biotechnology. And through Jules' viewpoint, he is able to fuse the two admirably.

The transcendent ending in which all merge in the great group mind

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may be a bit of masking of a weakness in thematic closure much as the equivalent in Kubrick's *2001* masked a similar failing; cosmic grandness of effect so often is the last resort of an unresolved thematic chord. But this *is* a first novel, a deep one and a good one, so Blumlein may certainly be forgiven for some structural jury-rigging in the pinch. He attempted something ambitious and he pulled it off; it would be too much to demand that he pull it off perfectly.

Paul Park's *Soldiers of Paradise* seemed to be the sort of thing I try to avoid reading when I first picked it up. It was subtitled "The Starbridge Chronicles" and the flap copy made it sound as if it took place in a future so distant that magic had been reborn. Another first novelist had presumed to launch his career with yet another open-ended science fantasy trilogy.

But the bio made Paul Park sound like a wandering mystic and I'm enough of a sucker for such stuff to open the book to sniff at the prose.

"To those who remember starlight, the spring sky over Charn is one of the most desolate sights in all the universe, for by the second hour after sunset there is not one star in all the sky. . . . There at the galaxy's edge, staring out over the brink of space, the citizens seem grateful for any cloud or mist, which might cast a veil between themselves and their own loneliness."

And somehow I was hooked. It soon became evident that Park was creating an extremely strange world, a world where mystic dimension and technology commingle, but not at all the usual science fantasy mish-mash. This is not some conveniently far future gameboard Earth but a planet in an extremely complex orbital situation.

And it slowly becomes apparent that the people are not exactly human either, any more than the so-called "horses" are really horses. The early technological details make their technology seem like primitive early industrial revolution and so their bizarre religious beliefs seem like the usual superstition. But this masks a higher science and a starfaring past, and the "Hells" to which the unworthy are condemned may just be other planets in the system.

If all this sounds rather vague and ambiguous, it is, for alas, as is almost inevitable with the first book in a series like this, the novel ends with revelations of new realities lurking in the background and mysteries whose answers we will not learn till the sequel.

I admit it, I generally hate this sort of thing. I like a novel to come to a full closure, with the story fully told, and the themes resolved, and a full picture of the fictional world to remember. I do not generally enjoy 280 pages of foreplay followed by prolonged coitus interruptus until the sequel is published.

But there are times when I am

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seduced into it despite my better judgment. The original serialization of the original *Dune* in *Analog* was like that, and Gene Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun* and the fugally interconnected ouevre of Cordwainer Smith, and Jack Vance's *Demon Princes* series and *Soldiers of Paradise*.

What does it take to hook me against my will?

The richness of the setting in which the series takes place. A strangeness that goes beyond artifacts and mores. Hot-shit prose style, the more baroque the better. A multiplicity of levels in the culture and a sense of its complex rootedness in its own history. An authorial consciousness truly capable of transcending the parameters of its own given culture. A real trip to someplace else that is really Someplace Else.

And Paul Park has created such a place, with its prolonged seasons reminiscent of Brian Aldiss' Helliconia on a somewhat shorter timescale, its sugar rain, its humans who are not quite humans, its antinomials who are even less human, its carnivorous "ponies," its complex city of Charn, itself a backwater of a larger empire, which in turn does not seem to be a unitary planetary government. There are several religions, numerous castes and clans, and a strange mixture of Medieval texture and Victorian-level technology.

At first *Soldiers of Paradise* seems reminiscent of Wolfe's Urth or Vance's Dying Earth, or any number of paler shadows, as Prince Abu Starbridge, his cousin Dr. Thanakar Starbridge, and the "antinomial" (anti-nomial, meaning people who choose to go unnamed), wander and machinate through it. But there are jarringly modern bits of language, then jarringly modern bits of science, and it slowly emerges that the first level theological self-view we get of this society masks its history.

The ruling caste is the huge "Starbridge" family, the bizarre cult of Angkhdt imposes a hard theocratic discipline seemingly based on a pseudo-Calvinist concept of predestination and the fear of being sent to one of the Hells upon death instead of back to Paradise, and *Soldiers of Paradise* would appear to be unfolding as a tale of liberty against theocratic evil, perhaps even of a Renaissance evolving out of a Dark Age.

And to some extent it is. But as Park reveals new levels of cultural historical complexity and astrophysical knowledge and detail, so too does the moral atmosphere complexify.

For Paradise is a moon, and the Hells are planets, and their orbital mechanics and surface conditions are known and coded into the weird mythology of Angkhdt. And the ruling family is called "Starbridge" because it is descended from a starship captain. And the harsh religious discipline is somewhat justified by the harshness of the planetary conditions.

The book ends with Prince Abu

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dead and sainted and Thanakar wandering away from Charn into the sequel and more of the mysteries of the setting unresolved than not.

Let's face it, this is one of the literary-cum-commercial techniques of the successful novel series—leave the reader curious. When the reader is left curious about the outcome of the story begun in the volume, this is a cheat, a soap-opera perpetual cliff-hanger. Park does not quite do this; Thanakar leaves Charn burning at the end to seek new adventures in the wider world of the next novel, but the story of his days there with Prince Abu *is* resolved, plotwise, and thematically.

What Park leaves the reader curious for is further details of the universe he has created, details that the reader knows are there, and a stripping away of the mythological veils screening its true nature from clear view in an eventual final closure that will resolve the thematic threads of the series.

As I say, I normally don't like this sort of thing, I don't like to be cozened into reading the next episode out of frustration, but whether I like it or not, Paul Park has hooked me on the next installment of this one.

And I suppose that that too is a kind of originality. If Park can maintain this level, if he eventually delivers the full grand story he promises after god knows how many more "Starbridge Chronicles," he will have achieved something rare indeed. He will have taken the form that is responsible for the lion's share of the crud that infests the SF racks and turned it into literary virtue.

Wouldn't *that* be new and interesting! ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

Lots of con(vention)s coming up in October. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many phones are homes). When writing cons, enclose an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons with a Filthy Pierre badge.

SEPTEMBER, 1988

9-11—**CopperCon.** For info, write: **Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Or call: **(602) 838-6873 or 968-5673** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Phoenix AZ (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hyatt. Guests will include: Robert Vardeman, fan Pat Meuller. Relaxed, to rest from WorldCon.

22-25—**French National Con, % Audemard, 118 av. de Stalingrad, Colombes 92700, France.** In Paris.

23-25—**MosCon, Box 8251, Moscow ID 83843. (208) 882-0364 or 882-3672.** Anne (Pern) McCaffrey.

23-25—**ArmadaCon, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead, Plymouth PL3 5HL, UK. (0752) 267-873.**

30-2 Oct.—**Contradiction, Box 2043, Newmarket Stn., Niagara Falls NY 14301.** Buffalo NY. Pohl.

OCTOBER, 1988

7-9—**CymruCon, % McCarthy, 29 Claude Rd., Cardiff, Wales. 593-590.** Butlin Holiday Camp, Barry Is.

7-9—**NonCon, 5308 40th Ave. NW, Calgary AB T3A 0X4. (403) 286-8128.** Palliser Hotel. F. & E. Busby.

7-9—**RoVaCon, Box 117, Salem VA 24153. (703) 389-9400.** Roanoke VA. J. May, K. Freas, H. Clement.

7-9—**BoucherCon, % Grounds for Murder, 2707 Congress, San Diego CA 92110.** Mystery world con.

7-9—**TusCon, Box 26822, Tucson AZ 85726. (602) 881-3709.** Donaldson, Bryant. Ambassador Inn.

7-9—**ArmadilloCon, Box 9612, Austin TX 78766. (512) 443-3491 or 448-3630.** Jeter, Foster, Shiner.

14-16—**ConTact, Box 3894, Evansville IN 47737. (812) 422-4407 (days) or 479-7022 (eves.).** Breuer.

14-16—**PineKone, Box 5368, Stn. F, Ottawa ON K2C 3J1. (613) 596-0815 or 728-4166.** Barry Longyear.

14-16—**ConClave, Box 2915, Ann Arbor MI 48106.** Dickson, artist T. Hamilton, fan T. J. Burnside.

21-23—**ConStellation, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815.** J. Varley, A. J. Budrys, artist T. Hamilton.

21-23—**MileHiCon, Box 27074, Denver CO 80227. (303) 936-4092 or 457-8368.** Science and SF writing.

21-23—**NecronomiCon, Box 2076, Riverview FL 33569. (813) 677-6347 or 973-0038.** Note new dates.

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3, Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** WorldCon Boston. $60 9/15/88.

AUGUST, 1990

23-27—**ConFiction, % Box 1252, BGS, New York NY 10274.** Hague, Holland. WorldCon. $60 to 12/1.

28-Sep. 1—**ConDiego, % Box 15771, San Diego CA 92115. (619) 461-1917.** NASFiC. $45 to 10/1/88.

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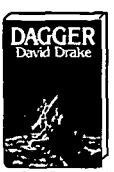

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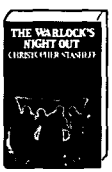

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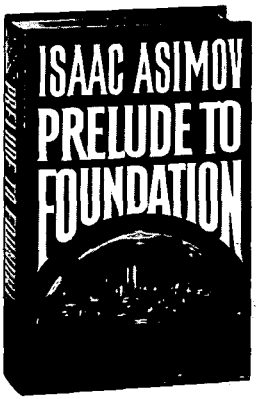

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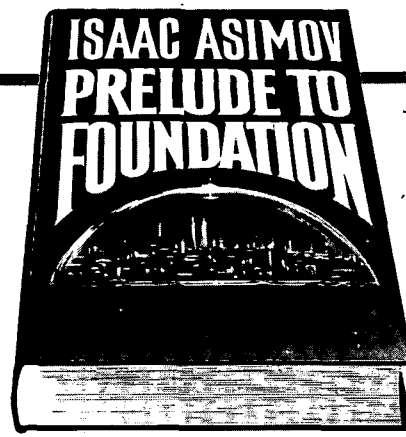

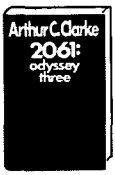

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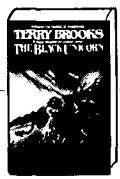

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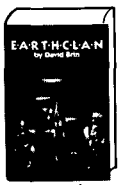

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